

Original Research Article

Causes of Violence in Public Secondary Schools in Kisumu-West Sub-County, Kenya

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Abstract: While global peace is very important for human coexistence, violence at school signifies risks to students' safety, social well-being, and academic achievement. This often results in long-term consequences. Guided by Social Learning Theory, this study employed the Descriptive Phenomenology design and one of the objectives was to establish the causes of violence in public secondary schools. Using Focus Group Discussions the study captured the lived experiences of learners on violence while oral interviews were used with School Principals, Head Prefects, and Guidance and Counselling teachers. Raw data collected were recorded, transcribed, coded, and analysed and presented thematically with occasional verbatim quotes. The findings revealed that violence manifests in multiple forms, including physical, psychological, sexual, and gender-based violence, with physical violence being the most prevalent. Major contributing factors included the impact of peer pressure, rogue teachers who administered corporal punishment in learner correction practices, impact of family on socialization, violence and economic gap, alcoholism, drug and substance abuse, and the challenges of technological impact. Gender disparities were also evident, influencing how learners experienced violence. The study further established that school violence undermines healthy learner socialization by fostering low self-esteem, strained peer relationships, absenteeism, school dropouts, and mental health issues, all of which negatively affect academic performance. The study concludes that addressing violence in schools requires a multifaceted approach, including creating inclusive safe and confidential solutions, mechanisms, strengthening guidance and counselling departments and supporting appropriate and adequate integration of new student into school environment to mitigate violence and support broader societal objectives of peace, cohesion, and security.

Keywords: School violence, Learner socialization, Public secondary schools, Adolescents.

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INTRODUCTION

This paper presents part of the findings of a wider study that investigated how violence in public secondary schools affects learner socialization. The study location was Kisumu West Sub County in the western region of Kenya. Violence in schools has become a pressing global concern, threatening not only the safety of learners but also the core function of education as an agent of socialization. Adolescence is a critical stage in life, when learners form their identities, social bonds and values, with school expected to provide a nurturing environment for this process. However, research indicates that school-based violence including verbal and emotional bullying, physical assault, various

forms of gender-based violence, and cyber bullying, undermine this role by fostering fear, mistrust, and antisocial behaviors (UNESCO, 2021; United Nations, 2019). In Kenya, violence in public secondary schools has escalated, with more than 70% of learners reporting exposure to some form of violence, such as bullying or corporal punishment (Kenya National Commission on Human Rights [KNCHR], 2019; World Health Organization [WHO], 2022). Studies further reveal that such violence significantly reduces students' social competence, impedes their ability to engage meaningfully with peers, and disrupts the development of essential life skills (Omondi & Muthoni, 2018; Wambua & Kimani, 2021). This underscores the urgent need to examine the drivers of school violence in Kenya,

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particularly in Kisumu-West Sub-County, where public secondary schools continue to grapple with escalating school related conflicts.

Several factors contribute to violence in Kenyan schools. At the individual and family levels, socio-economic deprivation, dysfunctional family backgrounds, and exposure to violent media content increase susceptibility to aggression (Kamau & Muthaa, 2019; Mutua & Kariuki, 2021). Peer dynamics such as bullying, gang affiliations, and substance abuse exacerbate these tendencies, while punitive disciplinary measures and poor teacher-student relationships foster hostile school climates (Ogutu & Nyabwari, 2018; Wambua & Kimani, 2021). Environmental aspects including overcrowded classrooms, unsafe facilities, and lack of effective guidance and counseling, further heighten risks (Mutua & Kariuki, 2021).

Recent studies emphasize that violence does not only harm learners physically but also undermines their mental health, leading to stress, anxiety, depression, and alienation from school communities (Kamau & Muthaa, 2019; UNESCO, 2021). Moreover, violence diminishes students' sense of belonging, discouraging participation in school activities, and erodes opportunities for positive peer interaction, all of which are vital for healthy socialization (Mutua & Kariuki, 2021; Smith *et al.*, 2018).

Statement of the Problem

Despite substantial evidence on the prevalence and consequences of school violence, few studies in Kenya have examined its impact on learners' socialization within the specific context of Kisumu-West Sub-County. Existing research has often focused on academic performance or disciplinary statistics, overlooking the nuanced ways violence shapes peer interactions, self-concept, and integration into the school community (Ogutu & Nyabwari, 2018; Mutua & Kariuki, 2021). Furthermore, the lived experiences of affected learners remain underexplored, limiting the ability of policymakers and educators to design interventions that address both risk and protective factors. Understanding the root causes of violence in Kisumu-West schools is therefore crucial in safeguarding learners' wellbeing and promoting environments that nurture values, resilience, and citizenship. Such insights will enable stakeholders to develop holistic strategies that improve school safety, strengthen student socialization, and ultimately produce well-adjusted individuals who can contribute positively to society. The findings of this study inform educators, policymakers, and other stakeholders on strategies to prevent and manage violence in public secondary schools. Effective interventions can help create safe and supportive learning environments that promote social competence, resilience, and positive citizenship. In this way, the study not only contributes to academic

knowledge but also to an enhanced quality education and sustainable livelihoods for learners.

Objectives of the Study

Though multiple objectives guided the study, this paper delves on one objective that sought to establish the causes of violence in public secondary schools.

Research Question

It sought to answer questions related to causes of violence in these public secondary schools as gathered from the lived experiences of learners, teachers, School Principals and those in charge of counselling.

Significance of the Study

This was necessitated by the incidences of violence in Kenyan secondary schools that have increasingly attracted public attention, with mass media frequently reporting cases of student unrest. Cases like arson attacks on school property, particularly during the second term of the school calendar, especially in boarding schools have been witnessed. Equally troubling is the persistence of harmful practices such as the bullying of newly enrolled Form One students, which undermines their adjustment and sense of belonging. Despite the recurrence of such cases, there remains a knowledge gap regarding how these forms of violence influence learner socialization, particularly within the context of public secondary schools.

Justification of the Study

This study is justified by its focus on adolescence, a critical stage of identity formation and social development, where peer interactions, family background, and school climate play decisive roles in shaping behaviour. By investigating how violence - whether direct (physical assaults, bullying, arson) or indirect (psychological harassment, social exclusion) - affects students' ability to build relationships, internalize values, and function within school communities, the research provides evidence necessary for strengthening socialization processes in schools.

Theoretical Framework

This study was anchored on Social Learning Theory, initially advanced by Albert Bandura in the 1960s. The theory provides a useful lens for examining how violence influences learner socialization in public secondary schools. Social Learning Theory emphasizes that adolescents, who are at a critical stage of identity formation, are particularly susceptible to adopting behaviors modeled by influential peers, teachers, or even the broader school culture (Bandura, 1986). In violent school contexts, learners may normalize aggression as an acceptable means of asserting dominance, resolving conflicts, or gaining peer approval. By applying Social Learning Theory, this study sought to understand how students' exposure to violent behaviors influences their attitudes, beliefs, and interactions, and how these, in turn, affect their broader socialization process. This

framework not only provides insight into the mechanisms that sustain violence in schools but also guides the design of interventions.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In this study, Descriptive Phenomenology design was used to explore the lived experiences of teachers and learners regarding violence in public secondary schools. The design relied on narratives provided by participants, capturing how they construct and interpret their social realities. Data collection methods included oral interviews with School Principals, Guidance and Counselling Teachers and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with learners. These methods allowed participants to openly share their perspectives and experiences on school violence, enabling the researcher to capture rich, descriptive data. Class teachers provided valuable perceptions into individual learners, as they interacted closely with both students and parents. Guidance and counseling teachers contributed data on cases confided in them, often involving rehabilitation or referrals. Prefects, particularly Class Prefects and the Head Prefect, offered perspectives as peer mentors of discipline and student Behaviour, including bullying or planned unrest.

Sample Size and Sampling Techniques

In sampling, three schools were purposively selected to ensure balanced representation: one Boys' Extra-County school, one Girls' County school, and one Mixed Sub-County school. Within each school, participants included the principal (or Deputy), the Guidance and Counseling teacher, and at least two class teachers. For learners, between 5 and 10 students from Form One were involved, as they are most vulnerable to violence when newly enrolled. Additionally, Form Three students, considered to be at the peak of adolescence, participated through Focus Group Discussions. These groups included Class Prefects, the Head Prefect (School President), and learners with direct experiences of violence. The recorded oral interviews and FGDs' data was transcribed, coded and discussed under themes during analysis.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Violence and Schooling

Assault in public secondary schools reveals itself in different forms including learners amongst themselves, teacher to learners, and influences from parents or support staff. Many educators argue that the abolition of corporal punishment contributed to increased indiscipline (Dhlamini, 2019). School environments, economic gap, impact of family on socialization, poverty, and limited or no guidance and counselling services play a critical role in shaping learner behaviour. Rapid social change, community influences, easy access to weapons, rapid social change also intensify the situation (Stein *et al.*, 2017; Oosthuizen *et al.*, 2017). Learner-teacher conflicts may arise when

enforcing discipline, especially during cases such as examination malpractice, sometimes resulting in violent exchanges. Such violence often escalates from minor actions, like throwing objects, to severe confrontations when retaliation occurs. Strict regulations in curriculum or co-curricular activities may also heighten tensions among learners.

Family conflict is another contributing factor. Domestic violence in the form of quarrels, spouse battering, child abuse, and neglect creates a hostile home environment, which learners replicate at school. Walker (1999) highlighted the direct link between family violence and community or school aggression. Physical violence among students can begin with playful interactions escalating into serious fights. It includes acts such as slapping, pushing, punching, and, in extreme cases, kidnappings (Jungmeen *et al.*, 2019). Exposure to such violence negatively affects students' concentration and academic outcomes (Teo *et al.*, 2020). Additionally, adolescents facing mental health challenges such as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) are more prone to violent behaviour, which sometimes leads to dropping out of school (Theule *et al.*, 2019).

Emotional and verbal violence is equally detrimental. Victims often suffer from anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, disobedience, and declining academic performance (Tony, 2018). Research shows that children exposed to such violence frequently engage in peer conflicts, counterattack authority, and struggle academically (Raphaela, 2015). Learners from troubled environments often show fewer prosocial behaviours and more personal difficulties (Sternberg *et al.*, 2016). In sum, violence in schools is influenced by multiple factors, including violence and economic gap, rocked teacher and learner correction, impact of peer pressure and impact of family on socialization. These causes necessitate a contextualized study to understand their unique impact in Kisumu-West Sub-County.

Violence in Public Secondary Schools

The study established that violence in public secondary schools arises from multiple interacting factors. A dominant cause was economic gaps, rocked teacher and learners' correction, impact of peer pressure and impact of family on socialization. This initiation-like practice created unsafe learning environments. Another key contributor was the persistence of punitive disciplinary methods, despite the ban on corporal punishment. Learners subjected to harsh punishments or public humiliation often developed resentment and mirrored violent behaviors in peer interactions. Teachers also noted that family backgrounds played a critical role, with learners exposed to domestic conflicts or abuse displaying aggression in school as a coping mechanism.

Substance abuse was also highlighted as a driver of violence. Students using drugs such as alcohol and marijuana exhibited impaired judgment, lowered

self-control, and increased hostility toward peers and teachers. Socio-economic inequalities further contributed to violence, with students from disadvantaged backgrounds showing frustration or aggression linked to unmet basic needs or feelings of alienation. Additionally, lack of proper supervision in understaffed schools, coupled with large student populations, created opportunities for bullying and fights to thrive unchecked. Collectively, these factors illustrate how social, economic, and institutional influences intertwine to perpetuate school violence.

Violence and the Economic Gap

Globally many countries suffer or enjoy life due to their political, social or economic status or relations in life. The global scene is often replicated within the family unit. The socialization process, especially at secondary school level, tends to avail opportunities for education intervention and growth if factors like violence are controlled. However, students from low-income backgrounds often face challenges such as lack of education resources, scarcity, and emotional distress. These frustrations could result in aggression and anti-social behaviours, as some learners resort to violence to express their dissatisfaction or influence over their circumstances. In fact, the economic gap among students occasionally leads to battles, with those from less privileged backgrounds feeling dissatisfied or resorting to hostile behaviour to gain respect among their peers.

In the study, the School Principals' emphasis on economic gap aligns with broader sociological perspectives on violence. Studies have shown that economic gap can contribute to increased rates of violence in communities and schools (Sampson et al., 2018). The principal's observations of students from low-income backgrounds experiencing frustration and resorting to aggression reflect these broader societal patterns. One of the class prefects observed that as from form two classes, most learners start grouping themselves according to family economic status. He explained

"Towards end of form one into form two the learners start to be in groups according to their family background. Those who afford school and boarding requirement group themselves in groups calling themselves the haves or the school tycoons. We also have the middle and those who completely just survive during period in school. All this causes boundaries even in class and dormitory amongst us"

This affects the socialization of learners in the school environment. The class teacher who are like the protectors of all this learner's family background explained, that sometimes learners depicted the act of keeping of from their class classmates. On enquiry the learner reported that were warned by their parents not to as a result what their parents because of what the parents

sees in terms of contribution on class what's app walls. The teacher added by saying.....

"I was in class during maths lesson and learners' desk was having two text books while the next student didn't have any. When I asked why they can't help their neighbour one of them replied saying that I can't because my mum told me not to be her friend because her mum never contributes when one has lost a parent or a sibling her parent are bad"

Another learner who was a witness of violence observed that at classroom level, there exist some groupings of those who have good uniforms, books and other needs in class and in the dormitory. She explained that the groupings called themselves 'scratch my back' meaning they only help those learners in their groups only, those who can give back. Furthermore, the link between financial inequalities and conflict within schools underscores the importance of addressing social justice issues in preventing school violence.

Violence in the Name of Discipline

Education in school requires agreement and teamwork; thus, teachers and administrators act accordingly to lessen disruption of the schooling programs. Specialised training and educational strategies ought to prepare and guide teachers and managers for this duty. The standards are clear, nevertheless, the practice fell short off the normal ethics hence the concern of the study expressly in regard to the gross violation of professional ethos and policy guidelines in actual enforcement of discipline within the school environment.

A momentous cause of violence identified in the study was rogue teachers and learner's corrections. Despite the official ban of physical punishment in schools, some teachers still resulted to it to enforce discipline. Students who faced severe whippings and shame in front of their peers would react by becoming violent toward others. This not only raised resentment but also promoted the use of aggression as a way of resolving conflicts. As adolescents learn by observation and imitation, and they will always practice the same on their fellow learners.

School rules stipulated and rogue and violent correction and non-modelling leadership, sometimes triggered aggression and resistance among students as it was reported by some of the respondents.

"How does the school expect us to be at peace yet the teachers themselves are promoting violence. The same teachers in the disciplinary committee are ones who are defending the guilty ones and terribly punishing the innocent. We won't be in position to accept peace when the process used in solving conflict is wrong"

Lack of adequate clear communication and failure to address grievances in a structured manner often

leads to frustrations that escalate into violent behaviour due to bitterness at the lack of justice.

Peer Pressure and Violence

Peer pressure is a process in teenage experience that basically involves attachment and search for self in socialization. It is often a challenge to strike a balance between acceptance by friends and individual identity and values. Social groups exert positive or negative influence to members without exception. The Sociology of education seeks to understand the influence of peer-driven norms and practices in the socialization dynamics so as to ensure that wholesome learning can take place in an inclusive environment. This stage becomes critical as it is when teenagers often make comparisons within themselves while navigating the process, and sometimes getting into challenges of firmness of purpose and values. There is possibility of positive and negative influence outcomes during peer interaction.

In the interviews, this challenge was identified by the School Principals and the Guidance and Counselling teachers as well as some Head Prefects. They observe that in some instances, senior students often felt the desire to assert their dominance over their juniors, leading to physical aggression, intimidation, and other forms of harassment. The culture of bullying was deeply schools, where new students were subjected to mistreatment as a form of initiation, especially to Form one students who were newly enrolled or those who joined from other schools. Such practices create an unsafe learning environment and contribute to the persistence of violence among learners.

During the interview with the School Principals, one of them observed that he had seen the senior students asserting dominance and the normalization of bullying of junior learners in the name of initiating them into the system. This mostly happened to the Form one students who were just joining Secondary schools. One of the participants; a prefect claimed...

“violence among students is mostly caused by conflicts related to competition in academics, peer group influence, and misunderstandings over personal belongings such as books...money, or... or even mobile phones when we are out of school and we bring the issued to school. Some violent encounters are seen in bullying, where senior students mistreat their juniors”

The Guiding and Counseling teacher also added that peer-driven norms have negatively affected learners in many situations at school and extended to home. She claimed:

“One of learners came to me on enquiry on how she can be free from irresponsible sexual Behaviour like lesbianism where she was initiated by her peer group. She said because of that her group never wants her to associate with

others, and if she does, then there is aggression between her and her group”

This study is supported by, Ibrahim *et al.*, (2021) who examined the underlying factors contributing to violence in Nigerian secondary schools, identifying issues such as peer pressure, societal norms, and ineffective disciplinary measures as significant determinants. The study underscored the importance of addressing these root causes to create safer and more conducive learning environments where students can thrive academically and socially.

Technology and Violence

In conduit with globalization, technology has been employed in every sphere of life, and the teaching-learning process exemplifies that fact. In each and every day the world socially becomes a village through technology. As learning is socializing, school teaching has also adopted technology in education. However, loose application or exposure to technological gadgets threatens the very social fabric that education purposes to spread and reserve. Technology has both positive and negative influence on education as adolescents are always innovative; they have invested their minds in mass media that really influences the content of mind, desires and intentions in school. Studies have revealed that it is a tough task to firmly determine with clarity the extent of technological influence. The gap calls for further research to ascertain the depth and breadth of the impact.

The study exposed that increased use of mobile phones had eased access to mass media platforms among students and had brought new challenges, including negative and positive implications. More learners could access it and come up with new approaches of answering questions or getting additional information in a particular topic while others used it for cyber bullying and sharing of inappropriate content, which sometimes led to confrontations among learners. This often happens with day scholars or during the holidays for those in boarding school and it gets extended to the school. Those who get access to violent movies or video games, tended to emulate such behaviours in their real life at school and at the classroom level. In this regard, lack of structured guidance and counselling programs in some schools left students with no safe space to express their emotions, resulting in bottled-up anger that sometimes erupted in violent behaviours and blind coping of violent scenes and individuals in movies.

School Principals suggested that there is the need to enhance monitoring mechanisms by assigning trained teachers and prefects to oversee student interactions in isolated areas and in the school environment. On the other hand, technology gadgets like CCTV surveillance could be used in high-risk areas to discourage violent occurrences; one of the School Principals suggested. In another dimension, teenagers

may outshine teachers in technological skills thereby generating openings for indiscipline especially with students from stable economic background vast access to high technology like Artificial Intelligence.

Drugs and Alcohol Related Violence

Adolescent socialization involves making choices; some of which may lead to disorder and even chaos due to confused sense of identity and what actually provides fulfilment for them. Many adolescents engage in many things like cheating; sometimes called 'wash' or gambling which may result to anger when one is conned out of the game and end up being violent. Though not to a great magnitude, within schools, some cases have been reported. For the Day scholars, they join the village gamblers and project their grievances and violence to school. so as to seek for identity or self-fulfilment. There are those that choose substance abuse, drugs or even alcohol for same reasons like self or group identity in socialization through the school. Drugs and substance abuse were identified by the School Principals and Guiding and Counselling staff as a contributing factor to violence. One of the Guiding and Counselling teachers explained...

"I noted one of the Form two class prefects who was a good informant in my department begin to isolate herself. I took a step to know what was the problem. On enquiry one of the classmates, said that as a friend the girl had confided in her that had begun to use drugs that impairs her participation in class and so if she doesn't use, she feels like not talking or be around people. Sometimes she even becomes aggressive"

Earlier research established a clear link between substance use and increased risk of violent behaviour, particularly among adolescents (National Institute on Drug Abuse, 2020). This scenario was highlighted by both students and teachers in the study. Moreover, School Principals indicated that drug and substance abuse among students contributed to violence in schools. Some students engaged in drug abuse, which impaired their judgment and increased their likelihood of engaging in violent behaviour. Schools have reported instances where intoxicated students become physically confrontational with their peers and teachers. The use of drugs such as alcohol, marijuana, and other substances reduces self-control, making students more likely to participate in fights, bullying, and defiance against school authorities. The Reports of increased violence in schools with inadequate supervision highlights the importance of adequate staffing and resource allocation in promoting school safety.

Family Background and Violence

The influence of family on the socialization process is crucial. Family encounter is at the fundamental stage of a child within the social structure and it introduces individuals to the society. The School Principals noted that the family stamp is a permanent

mark that cannot be washed or wished away in the life of a learner when it came to schooling. Home based matters thus played a critical role in contributing to violence in schools. They claimed that learners who experienced violence at home - whether physical abuse from parents or exposure to domestic conflicts - often brought their frustrations into the school environment. Consequently, students become aggressive, picking fights with their peers as a way of coping with their emotions. Students exhibiting extreme hostility often traced back to troubled family backgrounds, indicating a strong link between home violence and school-based aggression.

Other studies have stressed the same scenario that exposure to violence in the home has been consistently linked to increased aggression and behavioural problems in children and adolescents (Evans et al., 2019). This aligns with the School Principals' observations that students from troubled family backgrounds exhibit hostility at school. The family social life has a direct bearing on Schooling. This spill over effect of domestic violence into the school environment underscores the interconnectedness of family and school contexts. Children who witness or experience domestic violence may learn to normalize violence as a means of conflict resolution, and they may also suffer from emotional trauma that increases their propensity for aggression.

CONCLUSION

Many researches on school violence have tended to be focused on its effects on academic performance, but this study emphasized its holistic impact on learners' social interactions, particularly among adolescents who are at a critical stage of identity formation and socialization. The findings revealed that violence undermines the school's role as a socializing agent, with long-term consequences for how learners integrate into society. Social adjustment at school reinforces the family and the society positively or negatively. The broader community risks reproducing cycles of aggression and social dysfunction. Socialization is therefore vital in nurturing well-adjusted citizens.

The study highlighted the often-overlooked proportions of school violence. Learners' reports of victimization both by teaching and non-teaching staff silently fostered forms of discrimination and exclusion. Moreover, Lack of homogeneity or consensus between teachers and parents over student management and handling created unnecessary tension that strained learner-teacher relations. These findings accentuate that violence in schools is a by-product of peer-driven, institutional norms and practices, in addition to the impact of family and community ideals on socialization, aspirations and expected outcomes. There is therefore need for holistic approach in containing violence and promoting healthy learner socialization.

Policy Recommendation

Within schools, there should be established structured systems to address violence effectively and fairly. This includes but not limited to creating inclusive safe and confidential resolution mechanisms, strengthening guidance and counseling departments and supporting appropriate and adequate integration of new students into the school environment. This would cultivate and inculcate a sense of responsibility, belonging and ownership.

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