

School violence: What makes learners vulnerable?

Lezanne Leoschut

Introduction

A 2005 study by the Centre for Justice and Crime Prevention (CJCP) highlighted the school environment as the most common site of criminal victimisation for young people between the ages of 12 and 22 years.¹ Violence within schools is not a new social problem but is emerging as a cause for serious concern given the recent spate of attacks within South African schools that have claimed the lives of both pupils and educators. These attacks indicate that school violence has now moved beyond mere bullying to become a form of victimisation with a more serious and violent nature.

It is well documented that crime and violence occurring within the school environment have grave implications for the physical, social and emotional well-being of children. Since children spend most of their time away from home within the school environment, this social space can have a profound effect on the socialisation processes of children and should therefore be a place where children feel safe and are protected from violence or the threat of violence.

Given the increasingly violent nature of incidents of violence occurring within South African schools, there has been an upsurge of research attempting to explore this social phenomenon. Many of these research findings have subsequently formed the basis for the design and implementation of various intervention programmes and strategies aimed specifically at improving the levels of safety within schools countrywide.² Despite these efforts, violent behaviour within schools has continued to

escalate, prompting the need to revisit this issue with more precision since there continue to be questions that remain unanswered.

In addition to ascertaining more detailed information on the extent, nature and correlates influencing the occurrence of violence within schools on a national level, what is also required is the identification of contextual factors that put learners at risk of violent victimisation within the school environment.

An awareness of the factors that increase the possibility that an individual will experience some form of violence within the school setting will prove useful to various stakeholders involved in addressing and reducing the incidence of violence within educational institutions. This information provides an evidence-based rationale for deciding how and where best to prioritise the resources at their disposal in order to curtail the victimisation of children and youths at schools.

The purpose of this paper therefore is to present a brief synopsis of the risk factors that increase the vulnerability of children and youths to violence within their school environments. Focus will be specifically on contextual risk factors rather than those stemming from the individual and his or her socio-economic status.

Child and youth victimisation

On the whole, children are at higher risk of victimisation than their adult counterparts. This international trend has been confirmed by South African studies as well. Findings



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from the first National Youth Victimization Study conducted in 2005 revealed that just over two-fifths (41.4%) of young people between the ages of 12 and 22 years had been the victim of some crime in the 12 months preceding the study – a rate almost double that of adults as reported in the 2003 National Victims of Crime Survey.³

The likelihood that a child will be victimised varies depending on different factors – one of which is their developmental stage. Younger children are likely to be victimised by family members because of their level of dependency on these adults. As they mature, their possibility of falling prey to such victimisation changes since they become physically able to protect themselves from harm. Notwithstanding this, older children and youths are not altogether free from the risk of victimisation. Instead, they become more vulnerable to other forms of victimisation such as robbery and theft – which normally occur outside of the home.⁴

Another factor that influences the possibility of children becoming victims of violent acts is the nature of the social spaces they occupy. When children are raised in environments fraught with crime and violence their options concerning the people they associate with within these spaces are limited. Subsequently, their exposure to individuals who engage in violent and criminal acts is significantly higher than those youths raised in social surroundings where crime and violence is not the order of the day.⁵

Violence within schools

One of the most important social spaces that children and youths occupy is the school environment. Since children and youths spend most of their time away from home at school, educational institutions have a significant influence on their psycho-social development. As previously mentioned, violence within schools has now moved beyond mere bullying – which has long been regarded as a typical childhood experience – to a more serious and violent form of victimisation that has even seen educators and other adult authority figures perpetrating violence against learners.

The prevalence of violence and threat of violence within schools countrywide compromises the learning processes of children, since quality learning cannot take place in environments where young people feel threatened. This then results in a number of negative outcomes for the learners, as revealed at the recent public hearings on school-based violence convened by the South African Human Rights Commission. The outcomes highlighted included the physical, emotional and academic consequences associated with learner victimisation.

More specifically, physical pain and injuries, feelings of fear and anxiety, depressive symptoms, low self-esteem, social isolation from peers, trouble concentrating at school, high absentee and dropout rates, and poor academic performance were most commonly identified as the outcomes associated with being the victim of violence at school.⁶ These consequences all have a diminishing effect on learners' motivation and desire to excel academically at school – a factor that has been found to increase young people's resilience to becoming involved in criminal and delinquent behaviour.⁷

Violence in schools takes on many forms including physical attacks, verbal aggression and sexual violence.⁸ These incidents of violence can occur between students, or between students and educators – where either party can be the perpetrator of the violence.

Researchers have long attempted to explain the occurrence of violence within educational institutions and have commonly attributed this phenomenon to factors stemming from the social environments surrounding the school such as poverty, exposure to family and community violence, gangsterism, high levels of drug and alcohol abuse, materialism and the normalisation of violence within South African society, which has led to children and youths becoming desensitised to violence.⁹

For this reason, what is happening in schools is often a reflection of what is happening in the broader social spaces



surrounding the schools. Hence the need to highlight the contextual risk factors that put South African children and youths at increased risk of falling prey to any form of violence within the school setting.

The National Schools Violence Study

To do this, the paper draws on the findings of the National Schools Violence Study conducted by the CJCP in 2007 in an attempt to address the paucity of national level data pertaining to violence within South African schools. On the whole this study aimed to explore the extent, the nature of and the factors underpinning violence within both secondary and primary schools throughout South Africa. The participating schools were selected randomly resulting in a total of 260 schools, of which 140 were secondary schools and 120 were primary schools.

At each school, 10 learners were interviewed within each grade resulting in a total of 12,794 participants. The learners were asked to respond to a survey questionnaire that explored their perceptions on violence and safety within the school and community, their exposure to violence within schools, their homes and communities, as well as their personal experiences of violence at school. All interviews were conducted anonymously and confidentially.

Although the study was conducted at a national level, the majority of the learners were recruited from the KwaZulu-Natal, Eastern Cape and Limpopo provinces. Black learners accounted for the greater part of the sample, while coloured, white and Indian/Asian learners comprised the lesser part. There were slightly more female than male participants in the study. See Table 1 for percentages.

The National Schools Violence Study focused on four primary types of violent experiences ranging from threats of violence to the use of violence in crimes perpetrated against the respondents. More particularly, the respondents were asked whether they had ever been threatened with violence by someone at school, or had ever been physically assaulted, sexually

Table 1: Demographic information of the study sample (n=12,794) school (%)

Province	(%)
KwaZulu-Natal	22.5
Eastern Cape	18.9
Limpopo	16.8
Gauteng	8.7
Western Cape	8.1
Mpumalanga	7.9
Free State	7.6
North West	6.3
Northern Cape	3.1
Race	
Black	84.6
Coloured	8.6
White	3.7
Indian/Asian	3.2
Gender	
Female	51.6
Male	48.4

What is happening in schools is often a reflection of what is happening in the broader social spaces surrounding the schools.

assaulted or robbed. To minimise recall ability the learners were instructed to report on any violence they might have experienced at school in the 12 months prior to being interviewed for this study.

Overall, one in five (20%) learners interviewed reported being the victim of any form of violence within their school environment in the 12 months preceding the study. This is an alarming statistic given the amount of time children and youths spend at school – an environment that is generally assumed to be a place of safety for learners.

When considering the specific types of violence experienced, the data revealed that threats of violence were more frequently experienced by these learners than any other form of violence explored. See Table 2 (*next page*).

More than a tenth (12.8%) of all the learners surveyed reported being threatened with violence at school in the 12 month period prior to being interviewed. Less than a tenth of all participants indicated ever being assaulted (5.8%), robbed (4.6%) or forced to do anything bodily against their will by someone at school (2.3%). Threats of violence, robbery



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Table 2: Respondents' victimisations at school (%)

	ALL learners (n=12,794)	Secondary learners (n=6,784)	Primary learners (n=6,006)
Anyone at school ever threatened to hurt you	12.8	14.5	10.8
Ever been assaulted at school	5.8	4.3	7.5
Ever been forced to do anything bodily against your will at school	2.3	3.1	1.4
Ever been robbed at school	4.6	5.9	3.1

and sexual assault were highest among the secondary school learners while physical assaults were most frequently reported by the primary school learners. These findings were statistically significant ($p < 0.001$).

At primary schools, robbery was most commonly experienced by female learners while males were more likely to report being sexually assaulted. Male and female primary school learners were equally likely to have been assaulted by someone at school. At the secondary schools, threats of violence, robberies and assaults were highest among the male learners, while their female counterparts were more likely to report having been sexually assaulted or raped at school. See Table 3.

The overwhelming majority of the violence experienced by learners within South African schools is perpetrated by fellow pupils at the school. Even though educators were significantly less inclined to perpetrate violence against school children, it is important to mention that educators were the second most commonly reported

perpetrators of violence experienced by children in South African schools. See Table 4.

While this paints a grim picture of the state of affairs within South African schools it is important to bear in mind that often times what is happening in the schools is a reflection of what is happening in the broader communities surrounding the schools, including families. For this reason the paper attempts to shift the focus away from the actual victimisation of learners and towards the broader social environments outside of the school in which learners interact and the role that it plays in increasing the vulnerability of learners to violent victimisation within school settings.

Contextual risk factors for school violence

The data revealed that the learners' negative experiences within their homes and the communities in which they live are significantly related to their experiences of violence at school.

Table 3: Victimisations at school, by gender (%)

	Secondary learners (n=6,784)		Primary learners (n=6,006)	
	Males	Females	Males	Females
Anyone at school ever threatened to hurt you	16.6	12.4	10.9	10.8
Ever been assaulted at school	5.9	2.7	7.4	7.7
Ever been forced to do anything bodily against your will at school	1.4	4.8	2.5	0.2
Ever been robbed at school	8.0	3.8	1.8	4.5



Community disorganisation

Disorganised communities are characterised by high levels of violence, crime, easy access to drugs and alcohol as well as easy accessibility to firearms – factors that are known to increase the vulnerability of youths to victimisation. Such a community provides a social context in which children are more likely to be exposed to violent and other offenders, and in so doing their risk of being victimised is significantly higher given their proximity to these perpetrators of violence. The specific indicators of a disorganised community that were found to be significant for the learners interviewed will be described independently in the ensuing sections.

Exposure to violence

Exposure to violence has long been identified as a factor that heightens the susceptibility of children and youths to victimisation. This notion was once again confirmed by the findings emerging from the schools violence data. One out of every two learners who described their communities as characterised by lots of fights (55.7%) and lots of crime (53.3%) were significantly more likely than those learners who did not view their neighbourhoods in this way to have ever been the victim of any form of violence at school ($p < 0.001$). More particularly, children and youths who live in communities where crime and violence is rife are nearly twice as likely as their

counterparts to be violently victimised within their school environments.

Since communities characterised by crime and violence often increase the likelihood that youths would be exposed to such violence, it was not surprising to find that many of the learners participating in the schools violence study had personally witnessed incidents of interpersonal violence between individuals in their own communities. Learners who had personally witnessed members of their communities intentionally attacking one another were twice as likely as those who had never been exposed to such interpersonal violence in their neighbourhoods to be a victim of violence at school. See Table 5 (next page).

Researchers investigating the effects of community violence exposure on children have consistently found a range of deleterious outcomes. By and large, being raised in violent communities negatively influences children's understanding of how the social world works.¹⁰ In addition to undermining their sense of safety and security, creating feelings of fear and anxiety, disrupting eating and sleeping patterns and leading to difficulties concentrating at school, exposure to community violence can also result in the adoption of violence as a legitimate means of resolving conflicts and as a way of protecting oneself from harm.¹¹ When these aggressive behaviour patterns are incorporated into an individual's sense of

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Table 4: Individuals responsible for violence perpetrated against school learners (%)

Secondary school learners			Primary school learners		
Type of violence	Perpetrators		Type of violence	Perpetrators	
Threats of violence (n=985)	Pupil	93.1	Threats of violence (n=651)	Pupil	94.2
	Teacher	5.5		Teacher	4.5
Assault (n=293)	Pupil	83.2	Assault (n=452)	Teacher	50.9
	Teacher	14.9		Pupil	47.7
Sexual assault (n=211)	Pupil	90.1	Sexual assault (n=86)	Pupil	83.8
	Teacher	8.4		Teacher	9.5
Robbery (n=399)	Pupil	89.9	Robbery (n=185)	Pupil	91.1
	Teacher	5.1		Teacher	4.1



The schools violence data revealed a significant association between access to addictive substances and victimisation at school.

Table 5: Community disorganisation and violence at schools (%)

	Have ever experienced violence at school (n=2,556)	Have never experienced violence at school (n=10,238)
Lots of fights in the neighbourhood	55.7	39.1
Lots of crime in the neighbourhood	53.3	38.1
Have ever witnessed community members intentionally hurting one another	50.5	33.8
Easy access to beer, wine or hard liquor in the neighbourhood	60.8	45.7
Easy access to drugs in the neighbourhood	31.9	17.1
Easy access to firearms in the neighbourhood	23.7	12.6

self, it becomes normal for them to relate to others in an aggressive way. This then further contributes to the culture of violence pervasive in South African communities.

Easy accessibility to alcohol and drugs

Communities that are characterised by high levels of crime and violence are also usually associated with the availability of alcohol and other addictive substances. The schools violence data revealed a significant association between access to addictive substances and victimisation at school (see Table 5). Participants who reported that it would be easy for them to access alcohol and other drugs in the areas in which they lived were twice as likely as those who had difficulty accessing these substances to be the victim of some form of violence within their schools.

Easy accessibility to firearms

Similarly, easy accessibility to firearms also heightened the vulnerability of learners to violent victimisation at school. More particularly, those who reported that it would be easy for them to access firearms in their communities were twice as likely as those who indicated the contrary to have experienced violence at school.

Socialising with negative peers

The social conditions characterising the

communities in which these respondents live seem to have some influence on the types of relationships they forge with other individuals who reside in their neighbourhoods. According to Nofziger and Kurtz,¹² children and young people who are raised in violent communities are likely to interact with delinquent peers. These interactions may not only provide opportunities for engaging in violent and delinquent activities but may also increase their risk of having violence perpetrated against them.

The respondents who had friends who were involved in drug-related activities or who were engaged in any other activities that could have got them in trouble with the police were significantly more likely than those who interacted with more conventional peers to report ever experiencing any form of violence perpetrated against them by someone at school. See Table 6.

The schools violence data revealed that children and youths who had friends who used drugs or who bought drugs were three times more likely than those learners who socialised with more conventional peers to experience violence at school.

Furthermore, those pupils who socialised with peers who sold drugs were four times more likely to be the victims of violence at school. See Table 6.

Learners who reported having friends who



have done things that could have got them in trouble with the police were 2.6 times more likely to experience any form of violence within their school settings. Having friends who have physically assaulted someone else and who have brought weapons to school with them was also found to heighten the susceptibility of learners to violence at school.

More specifically, socialising with violent peers makes learners three times more likely to be violently victimised at school, while having friends who carry weapons with them while on school premises makes learners 3.7 times more vulnerable to violence perpetrated against them by someone at their school.

The prevalence of crime and violence within South African communities highlights the proximity of children and youths to criminal and violent individuals within the areas in which they live. The easy accessibility to alcohol, drugs and firearms in their neighbourhoods and their interactions with delinquent peers also heighten their vulnerability to violence within their school environment by increasing the opportunities to fall victim to violence by exposing them to potential violent offenders. See Table 6.

Evident from the data is that peers are most likely to be the perpetrators of violence against children and youths within the school setting (see Table 4). Socialising with

peers who engage in deviant activities increases the risk of violent victimisation within schools.

Family crime and violence

Exposure to violence within the family was also found to significantly increase the vulnerability of children and youths to violence at their schools. Although family violence exposure was prevalent among all the participants, those who had ever been the victim of violence at school (19.9%) were significantly more likely than those who had never been the victim of any violence at school (9.2%) to report having witnessed family members intentionally beating, punching, kicking, physically pushing, hitting, slapping or attacking one another with a weapon.

In other words, those who had ever been victimised at school were 2.4 times more likely than those who had never been victimised to report that they had been exposed to interpersonal violence between members of their family. See Table 7 (*next page*).

Learners who had experienced violence at school did not only come from homes where they often witnessed family members hurting one another but were also significantly more likely to report that crime was an element in their families. More specifically, these learners were more inclined to come from homes where

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Table 6: Peer relationships and violence at schools (%)

	Have ever experienced violence at school (n=2,556)	Have never experienced violence at school (n=10,238)
Friends use drugs	5.1	1.8
Friends sell or deal in drugs	3.3	0.9
Friends bought drugs	8.1	2.8
Friends have done things that could have got them in trouble with the police	2.7	1.0
Friends have attacked someone with the intention of hurting them	15.1	5.2
Friends have brought weapons to school with them	7.5	2.1



It becomes evident that young people who are victimised at school often come from homes where family members have engaged in criminal and violent activities.

Table 7: Family crime and violence and school violence (%)

	Have ever experienced violence at school (n=2,556)	Have never experienced violence at school (n=10,238)
Have ever witnessed family members intentionally hurting one another	19.9	9.2
Family members used illegal drugs in the last year	23.0	12.7
Parents/caregivers have ever been in prison	9.0	4.6
Sibling have ever been in prison	13.8	8.9

members of their family had used illegal drugs or had been incarcerated for criminal offences. See Table 7.

The data analysis revealed that children and youths who reported that their family members use illegal drugs were twice as likely as those who indicated the contrary to experience violence at school.

Having family members who had ever been incarcerated also seemed to influence the risk of learners to violence. Those who reported that their parents had ever been in jail were twice as likely as those whose parents had never been incarcerated to experience some form of violence at school.

What's more, those who had siblings who had ever been imprisoned for criminal offences were 1.6 times more likely than those whose siblings had never been in jail to fall victim to violence at school.

It becomes evident from the data presented in Table 7 that young people who are victimised at school often come from homes where family members have engaged in criminal and violent activities – factors that make them vulnerable to victimisation at school.

Although it is not entirely clear how exposure to family violence and crime increases the likelihood that children will be violently victimised at school, it can be surmised that violent and criminal behaviour by family members is related to the increased risk of exposure for children and young people.¹³

Taking the findings further

It is the intention of this paper to highlight the contextual factors that heighten the vulnerability of children and youths to violence within their school settings. Given the recent spate of attacks in South African schools – some of which have been fatal – the need to be able to identify which learners are potentially at risk of victimisation becomes crucial. An awareness of these correlates is of paramount importance since effective intervention strategies are reliant on the comprehensive understanding of why young people fall prey to such experiences in the first place. Furthermore, an awareness of these factors will inform the effective determining of how and where best to prioritise police and school resources in order to minimise victimisation.

It becomes evident that all the factors highlighted in this paper – namely, family and community violence exposure, criminal behaviour by family members, easy accessibility to alcohol, drugs and firearms and interactions with negative peers – are all significantly related to children and youths' experiences of violence at school. Clearly, violence, crime, alcohol, drugs and weapons are endemic to the social environments that children and young people socialise in. Such environments provide the context in which children and youths are at risk of violent victimisation.

Young people who come from violent family environments and who are exposed to family members who engage in illegal activities are significantly at increased risk of violent victimisations within the school



setting. Family violence exposure can influence the risk of victimisation in different ways, one of which is that it increases children's exposure to individuals who engage in violent and criminal behaviours. Their proximity to such individuals increases their opportunities for victimisation.¹⁴

The high levels of family violence expose the continued tendency of South African families to employ violence as a means of conflict resolution. This highlights the need for targeted interventions aimed at raising awareness about appropriate conflict resolution techniques, and alternative methods of discipline are also required. These interventions should be targeted at the youth as well as at their families. Furthermore, the importance of fostering warm and supportive relationships between family members should be emphasised.

The family system does not exist in isolation but is situated within a broader community environment. When this broader social context is disorganised the risk of falling victim to violence is amplified. South African societies have previously been described as 'very violent'¹⁵ and the National Schools Violence Study seems to support this notion, suggesting that South African children and youths tend to live in disorganised communities characterised by high levels of violence, crime, easy access to drugs and alcohol as well as easy accessibility to firearms. These factors all significantly heighten children's susceptibility to violent victimisation within their school environments. These findings call for the urgent need to address the availability of alcohol, drugs and firearms to children and youths within South African communities.

Young people who are raised in violent communities often interact with negative peers. The negative role that interactions with delinquent peers plays in the lives of young people has been consistently highlighted. This paper has again proved that socialising with peers engaged in illegal and other delinquent activities significantly increases children's risk of having violence perpetrated against them by someone at their school.

As with the exposure to family and community violence, interaction with non-conventional peers increases the proximity of children and youths to violent offenders and in so doing provides the opportunity for victimisation. This is worrying given the importance placed on interpersonal relationships with others of the same age during the developmental stage of these young participants.¹⁶

While parents constitute the primary socialising agents for children, as children mature their peers become extremely influential in their socialisation since youths tend to spend most of their free time outside of their homes interacting with their male and female peers.

Different values seemingly need to be instilled in young people in this country. The youth should be taught and consistently encouraged to value characteristics such as academic and sporting excellence – values that are known to deter young people from interacting with non-conventional peers, and in this way lessen their likelihood of being victimised.

Apart from the home, children and youths of a school-going age spend most of their time during the day at school. Consequently, educational institutions have the potential to exert a considerable influence on the thoughts and behaviours of young people and can therefore play a significant role in emphasising different values and raising awareness about more constructive ways of gaining peer acceptance and approval.

These findings clearly demonstrate that what happens within schools is often a reflection of what is happening within South African families and communities. For this reason, the school violence problem cannot be viewed as the responsibility of the Department of Education alone.

Any efforts to address this issue should extend beyond the Department of Education to include significant role-players such as the learners themselves, their parents or primary caregivers, community members, the South African Police Service and other government departments.

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In the next paper

While this paper relied on descriptive statistics to describe briefly the contextual factors that were found to increase the risk of violence for learners who participated in the CJCP's National Schools Violence Study, the data lends itself to further analysis and interpretation. For this reason, a follow-up paper will be written that aims to ascertain whether these aforementioned factors,

while they increase the risk of victimisation, can be used to predict whether learners will experience violence within their school environments.

This further analysis will also reveal whether these individual risk factors remain significant and have the same influence on children and youths' risk of victimisation while occurring simultaneously with others.

Table 8: Contextual factors increasing the risk of violent victimisation at school

	Risk factors	Odds ratios	Chi-square values
Community disorganisation	Exposure to violence		
	• Lots of fights	1.854	X ² =194.988, df = 1
	• Lots of crime	1.960	X ² =231.387, df = 1
	• Witnessed community members hurting one another	2.001	X ² =245.344, df = 1
	Easy accessibility to alcohol and drugs		
	• Easy to access alcohol	1.845	X ² =187.538, df = 1
• Easy to access drugs	2.266	X ² =277.873, df = 1	
	Easy accessibility to firearms	2.181	X ² =136.237, df = 1
Socialising with negative peers	• Have friends who had used drugs	2.936	X ² =93.488, df = 1
	• Have friends who had bought drugs	3.023	X ² =151.911, df = 1
	• Have friends who sold drugs	3.968	X ² =93.968, df = 1
Family crime and violence	• Witnessed family members hurting one another	2.462	X ² =234.725, df = 1
	• Family members used illegal drugs	2.062	X ² =174.780, df = 1
	• Parents/caregivers ever been in prison	2.056	X ² =76.831, df = 1
	• Siblings ever been in prison	1.631	X ² =54.083, df = 1

These findings were significant at a .05 criterion of statistical significance.



ENDNOTES

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CJCP mission

The Centre for Justice and Crime Prevention (CJCP) is dedicated to developing, informing and promoting innovative evidence-based crime prevention focused on the groups identified as being vulnerable to victimisation or offending. The CJCP does this by:

- conducting rigorous research into issues of relevance to policy makers, public service officials, development partners and crime prevention practitioners;
- facilitating the implementation of crime prevention projects;
- providing sector-specific and accredited training in crime prevention for policy makers, public sector officials and non-governmental organisation practitioners; and
- disseminating the results of its research and lessons learned to relevant audiences.

About this paper

It is the intention of this paper to highlight the contextual factors that heighten the vulnerability of children and youths to violence within schools. To do this, focus is shifted away from actual victimisation and towards the broader social environments surrounding the schools, which influence the learners' vulnerability to having violence perpetrated against them within the school setting.

An awareness of these correlates is of paramount importance since effective

intervention strategies are reliant on the comprehensive understanding of why young people fall prey to such experiences in the first place.

Given the diverse risk factors, the paper concludes that any attempt to address school violence should extend beyond the Department of Education to include important role-players such as the pupils themselves, their parents, community members, the South African Police Service and other government departments.



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