

COMMENTARY

Racism Obstructs the Path to School Safety and Educational Equity: The Need for an Anti-Racism Focus in School Violence Prevention

MARC A. ZIMMERMAN, PhD^a  RON A. ASTOR, PhD^b

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This commentary was motivated by the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement the federal executive order on September 4, 2020 banning anti-racism training of federal employees. We believe, and the empirical evidence suggests, that positive social interactions, celebration of diversity, equity in access to educational resources and equal treatment of behavioral issues are vital to ensure our schools are places where youth can learn free from being hurt, bullied, or singled out by authorities. We outline how racism plays a role in school violence and how anti-racism may help to create safe schools for all students where they are treated equally regardless of race, ethnicity, religion, or sexuality. We focus on race because it animates several aspects school safety and violence prevention efforts. Racism in this context refers to structural factors and racial bias that underlie issues of school safety.

Structural factors of racism refer to the consequences of years of unfavorable policies that disadvantage people of color compared to Whites. Policies that prohibited Blacks to enroll in certain schools or colleges are the obvious example of this, but the redlining that occurred after World War II and continue that segregated Blacks from Whites in cities and suburbs across the nation are also culpable.¹ Redlining resulted in fewer resources from tax revenues for local public schools based on property values.

These structural factors set the stage for disadvantage that has several negative consequences for

communities and the schools located in them. Economically challenged communities experience more crime and violence, which often migrates to the school environment, and results in fewer resources for schools to implement programs designed to create safe and supportive school climates (eg, mental-health first-aid, trauma informed practices, threat assessment). Low resourced schools may also limit developmental opportunities for youth to learn critical thinking and social emotional skills that may help them avoid conflict and isolation. This perpetuated many factors associated with diminished academic success including larger schools and classes, fewer teachers and opportunities for enrichment, limited pipelines to postgraduate prospects, and constrained economic opportunities.² It is no accident that redlined places are often lower income communities largely inhabited by people of color. So, this history of keeping black, Latinx, immigrant, and native communities constrained perpetuates itself when we begin to consider school safety issues and solutions. Our US culture of individualism compounds this segregation by blaming victims for their behaviors and neglecting the social and historical context that influence behavior. This victim blaming orientation both creates expectations of certain behaviors and focuses attention on behavioral change that often fails to address structural factors that underly the behavior. Researchers have found that punitive measures are more likely in low-income schools in urban areas serving black and Latinx students compared to

^aMarshall H. Becker Collegiate Professor, (marcz@umich.edu), Department of Health Behavior and Health Education, University of Michigan, 1415 Washington Heights, Ann Arbor, MI, 48109-2029

^bMarjorie Crump Chair Professor in Social Welfare, (astor@luskin.ucla.edu), University of California-Los Angeles, Luskin School of Public Affairs, 3250 Public Affairs Building - Box 951656, Los Angeles, CA, 90095-1656

Address correspondence to: Marc A. Zimmerman, Marshall H. Becker Collegiate Professor, (marcz@umich.edu), Department of Health Behavior and Health Education, University of Michigan, 1415 Washington Heights, Ann Arbor, MI 48109-2029.

higher income mostly white serving schools.³ Thus, victim blaming motivates solutions to school safety that neglect the fundamental drivers of school violence.

This structural history can result in specific expectations based on doctrines of White Supremacy and White Privilege where skin color, (ie, often conceptualized as race) that result in differential treatment, rights, laws, and expectations that favor Whites. This may be structural, sometimes conscious or explicit, sometimes unconscious or implicit, but the result is the same because it discriminates based solely on race and creates biases that perpetuate structural factors associated with racism. We argue that greater attention is needed on how discrimination in school safety strategies can both preserve the existing power structure and hinder our ability to implement relevant and effective strategies to improve school safety. Many interventions are implemented that *harden* and have zero tolerance approaches or *soften* and provide more welcoming approaches to prevent school violence. The same program and intervention in a welcoming school compared to a zero-tolerance school can have differential racial justice outcomes. The same intervention in different school environments could lead to more enriching opportunities, the other could contribute to the school to prison pipeline.⁴ Let us count the ways in which both structural racism and racial bias may play themselves out for school safety.

First, we have concerns that we do not know enough about differential treatment in official school response to violent and bullying behavior in school. We know virtually nothing about micro-aggressions (including school staff, parents, and peers) and their effects on learning or school safety. Schools employ several strategies for violence prevention that focus on early detection such as threat assessment (<https://www.secretservice.gov/protection/ntac/>) and anonymous reporting systems. Although some threat assessment approaches have not resulted in differential treatment of threats by race, most threat assessment approaches have not been adequately studied for discriminatory practices regarding suspension, expulsion, and harsh disciplinary practices.⁵ We need more implementation research on how threat assessment resolutions may or may not be differentially applied by race. National data suggest regional differences within the United States as many southern states legally allow corporal punishment where black students are disproportionately disciplined.⁶ We call for research that examines variations in applications of the threat assessment, characteristics, and training of threat assessment teams, and conscious or unconscious biases that may drive resolutions to inform prevention strategies that help ensure racism does not play a role in this strategy for school safety.

Anonymous reporting systems (ARS) are another popular approach to early detection of threats to school

safety. To date, 26 states require some type of ARS in their schools. Yet, one systematic review of research on ARS (North E, Heinze J, Hsieh H, Pomerantz N, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI—unpublished) resulted in so few systematic studies that we know virtually nothing about its use or effectiveness, let alone information about how the issues reported are resolved. It is possible, eg, that the same offense reported in the ARS for a black child versus a white child may be handled or referred in different ways (eg, mental-health vs criminal justice referral). This is an area we need to invest significant attention to because, like threat assessment, how ARS reports are resolved may also be driven by unconscious biases. ARS also has promise for including early detection of signs of possible self-harm which brings us to a third issue of racism and school safety.

Second, application of target hardening strategies (eg, metal detectors, cameras, locked doors, armed teachers) are disproportionately applied to low-resourced schools because more resource demanding strategies (eg, mental-health first aid, trauma services, social emotional learning) require more sustained efforts with trained staff, school-wide multisector teams, and personnel available to devote the time and attention necessary for success. Lower resourced schools do not usually have such luxuries and if they do it is likely from ephemeral grant funding with an expiration date. Target hardening strategies send messages that schools are not welcoming places and are necessary because the school is not a safe place. This both interferes with learning and gives the illusion of safety because these strategies do little to prevent bullying, isolation, and other interpersonal factors that are antecedents of school violence.⁷ Target hardening measures also have limited effects on self-harm and suicide.

Third, self-harm is often overlooked as a school safety issue even though threat assessment and ARS strategies do include attention to early signs of self-harm. Self-harm can have significant effects on school climate and may result from experiences of bullying and isolation. Attention to self-harm also helps us move away from an approach to school safety that only considers interpersonal violence which is often rooted in racialized solutions. This may consciously or unconsciously result in a focus on race because of the expectations formed from structural factors and its concomitant discrimination that violence is an urban school problem (code for schools with predominantly non-white students). By neglecting self-harm in a school safety context may unwittingly and further bias how we think about and solve school violence issues. This leads to the notion that school violence is an *urban* school problem even though aggressive behavior, bullying, and interpersonal- and self-harm is ubiquitous in all schools.⁸

Notably, most mass school shootings are in suburban locations and most self-harm incidents occur in rural and suburban schools. Profiles of school shooters often include being bullied, feelings of isolation, and alienation in school. Efforts to change school climate and include social-emotional learning in schools have been employed to address these issues, but they may not include attention to racism and discrimination which may be necessary to begin to change the way youth think about each other. Whereas white youth engage in self-harm and suicide behavior more than black youth, this gap is narrowing.⁹

Fourth, the BLM movement has raised questions about school resource officers (SROs). SROs are police officers assigned to schools and are mandated in 29 states and the District of Columbia. Although many districts have recently voted to cut ties to their police partners, several of the largest districts across the United States have their own school police forces (eg, Atlanta, Miami). Just the presence of SROs can create concerns about safety because students might wonder why they need to be there, but for students of color SROs may represent even deeper concerns regarding their role especially in light of developments across the country of police brutality. Many people raise concerns that having a police presence even though they are there to insure safety and prevent violence criminalizing schools. SROs do receive specialized training, but it may not be focused on unconscious bias. They also rarely receive training in developmental science and may be unprepared to handle children and young adults whose brains are not fully developed and who may not make the most prudent decisions.¹⁰ Some even argue that the mere presence of SROs raises questions about structural racism as they are most often deployed in racially mixed or predominantly non-white schools.¹¹ Yet, SROs can play an important role in school safety, but they may also require more in-depth training regarding both racism and unconscious bias (we know of no evidenced-based approach being employed). Nevertheless, if SROs require more training in mental-health first aid and developmental science, then why not just hire more professionals with these specialized skills in the first place. The current national discussions about depolicing schools and offering more social services, youth development programs, and more mental-health professionals relates to current discussions about best practices for school safety strategies.

Fifth, one rationale for SROs is student-to-student violence which could be rooted in racism. Teacher-to-student racism also plays a role in interpersonal violence and bullying in schools. Microaggressions and bullying associated with skin color can result in a pathway of increased alienation from and decreased engagement in school both of which can increase the

probability of harm to self and others. Yet, student-to-student racism can also play a direct role in the interpersonal aggression and violent behavior rooted in histories of whites exercising power over non-whites, seeing them as inferior, and instigating fighting and a cycle of retaliation that escalates into groups fights and weapons involvement. Teacher-to-student racism plays a role in academic achievement, but it can also effect school safety and disciplinary practices as well.¹² One way this type of racism may operate is to lower academic expectations of black students and send implicit messages that reduce academic motivation, future orientation, and connection to school. These factors are all associated with greater problem behaviors, reduced academic progress, and tracking into noncollege remedial classes which have the effects of limiting economic opportunities later in life and repeating the cycles of educational disparity. Teacher-to-student racism may also result in conflict between them which exacerbates acting out by students as a means of exerting control and protecting dignity.

RECOMMENDATIONS

School safety strategies must include attention to racism in its structural and historical context and how it creates unsafe environments for non-white students. We need to create inclusive and tolerant climates that celebrate multiple perspectives, cultures, and ethnicities. Our schools also need to be adequately resourced to address mental-health issues and trauma. Yet, most importantly, we need to reflect on our school and local policies that may disadvantage one group over another. We need to address the underlying causes of school violence and create the deep-rooted changes that must occur to create safe learning environments for all children. We need school policies that require them to undo racism from top to bottom with the goal of creating safe and supportive school climates that are conducive to productive learning for all students. Policies need to ensure equitable distribution of resources includes attention to creating extracurricular opportunities, teacher training, smaller classes, school counseling services, multisector school safety teams, and of course, funding. Technical assistance for schools to address racism and racist implementation of program and policies are necessary if we are to create safe and healthy schools. School safety is vital for learning and healthy development, and it is time we pay particular attention to the role racism plays in creating unsafe learning environments for our children.

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