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School Mental Health Professionals' Perceived Efficacy of Violence Prevention Programs and

School Climate in Rural Schools

Jennifer Rotzal

School Psychology, University of Montana

SCHOOL MENTAL HEALTH PROFESSIONALS' PERCEIVED EFFICACY OF VIOLENCE  
PREVENTION PROGRAMS AND SCHOOL CLIMATE IN RURAL SCHOOLS

By

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## **Chapter I: Introduction**

In the United States, incidents of school violence increased 113 percent during the 2017-2018 school year from the 2016-2017 school year (Klinger, 2019). This increase in violence in schools makes the current movement for safer schools all the more critical. Although high-profile school shootings often obtain media attention, school violence remains a significant problem in the United States. Further, aside from the tragic but statistically rare school shootings, school violence encompasses several forms of physical violence, such as assaults; sexual violence, such as rape and sexual harassment; varying forms of bullying, including cyberbullying, and bringing weapons to school. The increase in threats and violence on school grounds, along with the growing movement for safer schools, highlights the need for action and further investigation pertaining to what improves school safety and provides a safe and enriching environment for students.

Not surprisingly, forms of aggression have been shown to negatively affect students and school climate. Specifically, rates of violence are known to cause both student mental health and school climate to suffer (Kutsyuruba et al., 2015). According to school climate theories, the presence of school violence is a significant indicator of a negative school climate (Peterson & Skiba, 2000). Several of these theories build upon the framework of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (Wang & Degol, 2016), which posits that the environments in which human development occur are interactive and influential, ranging from proximal to distal (Bronfenbrenner, 1992). With an average school day lasting about 6 hours, it is estimated that students spend over 1,000 hours a year on school grounds (Snyder et al., 2019), indicating that

they spend approximately one eighth of the year in school. Considering this significant amount of time spent in school, it is critical to identify the influence that the school environment can have on a student's well-being, as well as recognize the theories that address how school violence negatively affects school climate.

Despite media portrayals of violence within inner-city schools, such behavior is not exclusive to urban schools. Schools where there are fewer resources, and subsequently fewer preventative measures, are at the greatest risk of school violence, as seen in a longitudinal study by the Rural Adaption Project. The results of this study suggested that rural schools tend to lack the resources for violence prevention programs compared to suburban and urban schools (Cotter et al., 2015). In spite of this knowledge, there has been little research conducted on how the lack of school violence prevention programs affects school climate. Specifically, there is little information on how school mental health professionals believe the presence or lack of school violence intervention programs affects their school's climate. Because school mental health professionals are on the front line of support when incidents of school violence occur, it is vital to hear their perspectives, assess the perceived efficacy of programs, and determine whether these programs improve school climate.

To identify the effectiveness of school violence prevention programs and how it affects school climate in rural schools, we developed a survey that was distributed to school psychologists and school counselors. Because research has indicated that the implementation of school violence prevention programs has improved school climate in urban and suburban schools, it is hypothesized that this will also stand true for rural schools. Further information on the effect of school violence prevention programs in rural schools can also provide insight on

whether rurality affects the efficacy of programs or practices. One of the greatest threats to school safety is the lack of safety practices or programs; therefore, it is imperative to understand the relationship between such programs and school climate.

## **Chapter II: Literature Review**

### **School Violence**

School violence has been of great concern to policy makers and school professionals. With the influx of deadly school violence incidents over the recent decades, it is the perception of school administrators and teachers that school violence incidents are increasing with no signs of decline (Wynne & Joo, 2011). Program developers and policy makers have encouraged the implementation of school violence prevention programs, but despite over 200 institutional programs designed to prevent school violence, many schools struggle to implement such programs because of the resources they require.

Youth violence can be defined as the intentional use of physical force or power to threaten or harm others by youth ages 10-24 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020). The types of youth violence can vary across communities and demographic groups but can affect youth from all communities, regardless of US geographic region. School violence, such as shootings, assaults, weapons in school, or fights, are all events that can negatively affect a student's functioning in school.

Such forms of youth violence have been labeled as adverse childhood experiences (ACE) that can negatively affect a youth's physical and mental well-being and put them at risk for future health problems, mental illness, and substance abuse (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020). Youth violence also increases the risk for behavioral and mental health difficulties, such as future violence perpetration and victimization, academic difficulties, school dropout, and suicide (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020). Beyond physical and mental difficulties, school violence affects communities by negatively impacting perceived and

actual safety of neighborhoods and schools. Unfortunately, acts of youth violence can put a strain on community resources and further limit the resources that states have for other community needs (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020). Specifically, school violence creates a crisis that school mental health professionals must immediately mitigate, when otherwise more of their time is spent meeting the mental health needs of students.

Results from a 2015 household survey found that 48 percent of students experienced one or more forms of victimization, including physical assaults, sexual abuse and assaults, and receiving intimidating threats (Finkelhor et al., 2016). On a broader scale, 79 percent of public schools reported having one or more incidents of violence, theft, or other crimes take place on campus during the 2015-16 school year, amounting to approximately 1.4 million crimes. Of these crimes, 47 percent of schools reported one or more violent incidents to the police, accounting for 449,000 crimes or acts of violence (Musu et al., 2018).

### ***School Shootings***

A particularly horrific and widely publicized form of school violence is school shootings. Tragic events such as the 1999 Columbine School shooting in Littleton, Colorado have spurred the movement of increasing school safety and eliminating gun violence in schools. In most reported shootings, both teachers and students have been victims (King, 2014). The combination of nonstop media coverage of school shootings and the perception that school shootings are increasing in frequency and severity has heightened the concern of students, school staff, faculty, and communities about the safety of their schools. Although statistically rare, the fear of school shootings has loomed over communities enough that scholars have developed the term “The

Columbine Effect,” referring to the way public fear of school shootings has remained a depiction of modern-day violence in American schools (Muschert et al., 2014).

There are five recognized forms of school shootings: rampage shootings, school-related mass murders, school-related terrorist attacks, school-related targeted shootings, and school-related government shootings (Muschert, 2007). Of these varieties, the school related shooting incidents that have been the most common in the United States include rampage shootings, school-related mass murders, and school-related targeted shootings. The incidents that have gathered the most recent attention of the media are rampage shootings. These shootings are an expressive, non-targeted attack that are believed to take place to attain power or exact revenge on individuals or the community (Muschert, 2007). Rampage shootings take place at the institution and are committed by members or former members of that institution. Typically, the victims of a school shooting suffer as a tragic but indirect result of the perpetrator’s feelings towards the organization. Although rampage shootings have taken place at several levels of educational institutions, they are most likely to occur in middle or high schools (Muschert, 2007). The 2012 Sandy Hook shooting in Newtown, Connecticut and the 2001 Columbine shooting in Littleton, Colorado are examples of rampage shootings that occurred at the elementary and high school level, respectively. Beyond educational institutions, the tragic 2017 Las Vegas shooting at the Route 91 Harvest Country Music Festival, the largest mass shooting in American history, is considered to be a rampage shooting.

Another category of shootings is school-related mass murders, which are carried out by an individual targeting particular groups of people or the school institution in general (Muschert 2007). Those who carry out school-related mass murders are known to be motivated by desires

of distorted loyalties or for power or revenge. The 2018 Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School shooting is considered to be a school-related mass murder, as the gunman was described as being a disgruntled former student of the high school. Reports indicated that the gunman was bullied and hoped to avenge those who had bullied him.

Another variation of school shootings is school-related target incidents, which occur when either a current or former member of the institution specifically attacks an individual or group of individuals to obtain revenge for real or perceived maltreatment (Muschert, 2007). This variation is different from a rampage shooting due to its victims being particularly targeted, rather than it being an attack on the entire school. An incident that fits this category is the 2003 shooting in Red Lion, Pennsylvania, when a student shot and killed a school administrator (Muschert, 2007). Although all varieties of these school shootings take place, it was the perceived increase of rampage school shootings in the late 1990s and early 21st century that catalyzed much of the social science research into how and why these incidents occur.

### ***Physical Fights***

A far more common and less publicized form of school violence is physical fights. From a broad perspective, scholars have defined physical fights as a stretch of serious competitive violence. In these circumstances, adolescents reported fighting most often with friends and relatives. A common manifestation of interpersonal violence, research has indicated a wide range in involvement in adolescent fights that vary across countries and gender. In a 2015 study, a data set comprised of results from almost eighty countries indicated that about 11 percent of boys reported engaging in frequent physical fighting, whereas 3 percent of girls reported this same behavior (Elgar et al., 2015). This study correlated average income and government spending on

education and rates of physical fighting among youth. In countries where rates of average income were low, there were more reports of physical fighting, suggesting that overall country wealth, or lack thereof, is a strong determinant of youth violence (Elgar et al., 2015). Studies that have focused exclusively on the United States have indicated that about 24 percent of the student population has engaged in a fight during the twelve months before the survey, with most of these fights occurring among males. This is not surprising since males are often more likely to engage in risky behaviors such as alcohol and drug usage and having multiple sexual partners (Kann et al., 2018). Many scholars suggest that the cultural perceptions of masculinity likely influence why males are more likely to engage in unhealthy behaviors (Elgar et al., 2015). Additionally, there tends to be more tolerance towards males who engage in such behaviors, as opposed to their female counterparts. In particular communities, where violence may feel like an acceptable action, males may not experience strong deterrents from engaging in violent behavior (Elgar et al., 2015).

Similar to gender differences, studies have identified racial-ethnicity differences surrounding physical fighting among high school students. Physical fighting is one of the many behaviors that is measured by monitoring systems such as the Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance Survey, or YRBSS. Developed in the 1990's, the YRBSS determines the prevalence of behaviors that contribute to leading causes of death, disability, and social problems among youth and adults in the U.S. (Kann et al., 2018). According to the 2019 Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance Survey (YRBSS), approximately 37 percent of Black males were likely to engage in physical fights, compared to 27 percent of White and 28 percent of Latino males (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020). Scholars have hypothesized that due to systemic racism issues such as

poverty, ethnic minorities are more likely to live in unsafe environments, where these behaviors are either encouraged or done out of necessity. It is also important to note the similarity in rates of physical fighting among White (27 percent) and Latino (28 percent) males and how this could suggest that there is not as significant of a difference in physical fighting between these two races as some may stereotypically assume.

Results from the YRBSS also indicated that approximately 21 percent of students admitted having been in a physical fight at least one time during the previous twelve months, with about 8 percent reporting that these fights took place on school property (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020). This form of violence, whether taking place on school grounds or in the community, affects students' abilities to focus and achieve academically in school. Fights that occur on school grounds are more likely to impede on academic functioning, as there lies the risk of the possible continuation of the fight through the subsequent gossip of the fight or planning of future retaliation.

### ***Weapon Possession***

The act of bringing weapons to school, even if they are not used, is in itself an act of violence (King, 2014). Nationwide, roughly 14% of students carried a weapon (i.e., gun, knife, etc.) on at least one day during the previous 30 days prior to completing the survey, with about 3% of those students reporting that they carried a gun or other weapon on school property (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020). This national percentage varies greatly, with schools in Massachusetts reporting 11% of their students carrying a weapon in the previous 30 days, whereas Montana reported over 25% of students carrying a weapon during the same time frame (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020). This rate is believed to be much

higher among students in rural schools or states, which corresponds to the Montana statistic being significantly higher than its primarily urban counterpart. Furthermore, it is believed that students underreport whether they bring a weapon to school due to fear of punishment from families or schools.

The higher rate of weapon possession in rural schools is suggested to be due to the weapon culture that communities may possess. A study focusing on the tendency of weapon carrying based on U.S. geographic region and race found that those residing in the Western and Southern U.S. regions were more likely to carry guns for self-protection compared to their Northern counterparts (Felson & Pare, 2010). In many communities, the practice of carrying guns for protection is a cultural tradition that has been passed down for generations. Even though it has been over a century since the end of Western frontiers and a direct potential need for self-protection, the cultural tradition of carrying firearms for protection may continue today. This practice may remain due to a “cultural lag,” which suggests that a particular behavior, such as gun carrying, continues to be prevalent despite changing circumstances and the behavior no longer being adaptive to its environment (Felson & Pare, 2010). Further evidence of the influence of culture and tradition on weapon carrying is indicated in a longitudinal study by Wallace (2017), which identified a positive correlation between juvenile gun carrying and the rates of gun ownership in their community. Not surprisingly, weapon possession is also suggested to be higher in Western and Southern regions of the U.S. due to increased rates of using guns for sport, such as hunting (Felson & Pare, 2010).

Outside of community or cultural practices, school climate can be one of the many contextual factors that influences whether a student brings a weapon to school. Other contextual

factors include neighborhood and school characteristics, socioeconomic status, and race and/or ethnicity distributions; however, it is generally considered a nationwide public health issue.

Students may also choose to carry a weapon at school as a result of peer influence, to reduce the risk of victimization, and fear or safety issues (Brank et al., 2007). Students who bring a weapon to school are more likely to engage in additional problematic behaviors (Brank et al., 2007), particularly if their peers are also bringing a weapon to school or are engaging in other criminal activities. Furthermore, one quarter to one half of students in grades five through twelve did not support the idea of telling an authority figure if a peer had a weapon at school, which is believed to be due to a variety of peer attitudinal norms such as the fear of social repercussions if caught tattling and wanting to appear nonchalant when faced with a potential threat (Perkins, Perkins & Craig, 2019).

### **School Violence Theories**

School violence, regardless of extent or severity, has been linked to detrimental psychological effects on victims and limits the ability of school administrators to create a healthy and functioning learning environment. Students that are victims of violence on school grounds are more likely to engage in avoidant behavior and withdraw from school altogether (Wynne & Yoo, 2011). Over the past several decades, scholars have developed hypotheses as to why rates of school violence are rapidly increasing. There are several theoretical perspectives to better understand how and why school violence can occur, with more recent theories being outlined below.

A commonly cited theory in school violence literature is routine activity theory, which suggests that acts of school violence occur when the following three circumstances are present:

a) a motivated offender, b) a suitable target, and (c) absence of capable guardians (Cohen & Felson, 1979). This theory is also applied to criminal behavior outside the school, with researchers believing that offenders are most likely to take advantage of a situation where they feel they have increased access to a target and limited guardianship of people or places (Wynne & Yoo, 2011). As a result, vulnerable targets are most likely to become the victims of these crimes of opportunity. Henson et al. (2010) gathered self-report data from 541 high school students, with results suggesting that students were more likely to engage in criminal or delinquent behavior when there was less likelihood of an adult or guardian being present. This study emphasized not only the importance of having adults present in youths' lives, but also the importance of providing a positive role model for adolescents to decrease the likelihood of criminal or delinquent behavior, as well as reduce the desire to engage in such behavior (Henson et al., 2010).

Proponents of the routine activity theory have focused on the individual- and school-level factors, as well as studying how one's daily routine can affect the student's risk of school victimization. However, some scholars believe that anti-violence policies that solely focus on the influence of routine activity theory in schools is too narrow of a lens (Muschert et al., 2014). Furthermore, failing to consider the multiple causal components of violence remains a risk. These include the wider cultural and structural context of the school and the interwoven role of school staff and district policy (Muschert et al., 2014).

Another common theory, defensible space theory, implies that acts of crime can be prevented by increasing opportunities for residents to control and defend their space against crime, while eliminating physical characteristics that attract offenders (Newman, 1972).

Newman (1972) theorized that changes in the physical characteristics of a space could increase the sense of community control, security, and ownership, which all in turn could reduce rates of criminality. Although this theory was originally developed with urban communities in mind, researchers have applied it to school violence theories due to the similarities in which offenders make decisions about the accessibility of the space when committing a crime and the risks associated with offending (Tillyer et al., 2011). Considering Newman's theory and applying it to a modern-day school environment, it is theorized that creating a space that generates the notion that acts of violence will be noticed would subsequently lead to a decrease in violent behavior. According to this theory, ways in which physical spaces can decrease the risk of criminal or violent behavior include maintaining its physical integrity (i.e., keeping the space clean and well-lit) and having an adult figure present to discourage opportunistic acts of violence.

Many of the research studies focusing on school violence theories utilize a multilevel opportunity perspective. This frame of reference combines concepts of environmental criminology (including theories such as routine activity theory and defensible space theory) and suggests that both individual and environmental-level factors directly influence the likelihood of a crime (Tillyer et al., 2011). This theory also assumes that the opportunity for crimes will be related to fear and risk perception, as it is assumed that risk perception and fear are rational reactions to perceived opportunity (Tillyer et al., 2011). Such opinions are consistent with the growing body of empirical research that demonstrates the correlation between individual- and environmental-level opportunities that influence the likelihood of crime, the perceived risk of crime, and the fear of a crime occurring.

### **Risk Factors for School Violence**

In addition to theories focusing on school violence, there are several environmental risk factors that increase the likelihood of an individual developing problem behavior that could result in school violence. Youth that engage in violent behaviors are disproportionately victims of neglect, poverty, family stress and conflict, and maltreatment (Fox et al., 2015). Particularly, youth that endured abuse (including neglect) are significantly more likely to commit a crime than youth who were not exposed to abuse. The correlation between childhood maltreatment and antisocial behavior is addressed in the developmental pathology perspective, which posits that the trauma maltreated children are exposed to can negatively affect their biological and psychological development by causing a neural impairment that inhibits the brain's ability to maintain normal functioning (Cicchetti & Rogosch, 2012). Such physiological changes to the brain's structure can lead to a maltreated child having explosive and even violent responses to non-threatening stimuli (Fox et al., 2015). This predisposition towards violence in maltreated or abused children can also be a result of poor emotion regulation. The effects of poor emotion regulation can cause substantial changes on the emotional development of a child and is hypothesized to be correlated to higher likelihood of externalizing violent behavior (Fox et al., 2015). Of course, a childhood of maltreatment and abuse does not make the development of violent behavior inevitable. However, it is important to reiterate how childhood trauma can increase the odds of antisocial and delinquent outcomes later in life (Fox et al., 2015). Having supportive family members or caregivers in a youth's life is a mitigating factor in reducing the likelihood of violence (Bushman et al., 2016).

Another prominent risk factor for school violence is social exclusion and isolation. Individuals who experience continuous victimization can feel socially isolated and distant from

the support system—in this case, their school—that was supposed to protect them. A rare but tragic occurrence can transpire when victims of social exclusion build strong feelings of resentment and seek revenge on their peers through acts of violence (Bushman et al., 2016). Social rejection can have a more profound effect on adolescents than on older adults. The increased importance of peer's perspectives, along with the brain's premature developed state of self-control and planning, can make the typical youth engage in risky behavior, especially in emotionally charged social situations (Bushman et al., 2016).

In spite of the reported environmental and personal risk factors, the National Threat Assessment Center (2018) is quick to note that there is not one profile that fits all student attackers. Instead of focusing on identifying personality traits or environmental factors that may influence a student's risk of being a perpetrator, there is more information that can be gathered by working through a threat assessment process, which is utilized to obtain the most relevant information about the student's behaviors, any negative or stressful events the student has experienced on school grounds and beyond, and identify any resources the student has to overcome such challenges (National Threat Assessment Center, 2018). Ensuring the safety of schools must go beyond identifying at-risk students and should address multiple factors such as physical safety of the building, violence prevention programs, and overall school climate.

### **School Climate**

School climate is a construct that was developed in 1908 by New York school principal, Arthur Perry. He emphasized the importance of a quality learning environment that allowed students to thrive academically and emotionally (Wang & Degol, 2016). The last several decades of research have indicated the need for the conceptualization of school climate to be less

simplistic. However, because there is no universal definition for school climate, scholars can use a definition that best suits their needs. This has led to the term ‘climate’ referring to many different aspects of the school environment (Wang & Degol, 2016). Scholars Freiberg and Stein (1999) defined school climate as the “heart and soul of the school” and described it as a way to gauge the quality of a school’s healthy learning spaces. This perspective relied heavily on the role school staff had in improving their school’s physical, emotional and academic environment. Freiberg and Stein also indicated that when students feel a sense of pride in their school and feel like citizens, they are more likely to take responsibility of their actions and those of others (Freiberg & Stein, 1999), which begins to address the relationship between school climate and school safety. Cohen et al. (2009) posited that school climate includes the norms, values, and expectations that support people feeling physically, emotionally, and socially safe. Cohen and colleagues also proposed that school climate refers to the different spheres of school life, such as safety, relationships, the environment, and larger organizational patterns, including shared visions and the physical structure of the school.

Although school climate is now recognized as a multidimensional construct, there is a lack of agreement on one comprehensible definition, as well as a lack of parameters that encompass the construct (Wang & Degol, 2016). School climate is a difficult concept to define, as it is not an individual experience (Cohen et al., 2009). However, the most common definition of school climate in education-related literature stems from the National School Climate Council’s definition, which refers to “the quality and character of school life” and can be derived from the “patterns of people’s experiences of personal safety, incivility and disruption, and effective learning and general climate (Cohen et al., 2009). These definitions were agreed upon

in April 2007 in collaboration with the National Center for Learning and Citizenship, Education Commission of the States, and the Center for Social and Emotional Education (Cohen et al., 2009) and have since been found in a wide range of literature.

The continued efforts in researching school climate has stemmed from the desire for more civil, safe, and supportive schools (Thapa et al., 2013). A growing body of research has indicated that a positive school climate is predictive of greater health promotion and risk prevention efforts (Cohen et al., 2009). Positive school climate has also been identified as a supporting factor in positive youth development, higher graduation rates, academic achievement, teacher retention, and effective school reform, among other positive outcomes. In fact, organizations including the U.S. Department of Education, Center for Disease Control and Prevention, Institute for Educational Sciences, and several State Departments of Education have focused on school climate reform as an evidence-based school improvement strategy (Thapa et al., 2013). Particularly, in 2007, the U.S. Department of Education invested in the Safe and Supportive Schools grant program that allotted statewide support to study school climate and identify school climate improvement efforts. Over the past decades, this growing body of research continues to underscore the importance of school climate in youth development and, relevant to this study, effective risk prevention strategies.

Among the varying definitions and measurements of school climate, there are four dimensions of school climate found in almost all current literature: academic climate, community, safety, and institutional environment (Wang & Degol, 2016). Academic climate pertains to the overall academic atmosphere, including school curriculum, teaching practices, teacher training, and professional development. It can also pertain to the quality of instruction, as

well as social, emotional, academic, and ethical learning (Cohen et al., 2009). Academic climate can also address the more distal dimension of school and classroom processes, such as how curriculum is presented and learned. A multitude of studies have shown that schools with positive academic climate produce students with high long-term rates of academic achievement (Cohen et al., 2009; Thapa et al., 2013, Wang & Degol, 2016; Suldo et al., 2012).

The dimension of community focuses on the importance of interpersonal relationships within the school (Wang & Degol, 2016). A positive community school climate would have respect for diversity, school community and collaboration, and morale and connectedness (Cohen et al., 2009). Caring, participatory, and responsive school climates have been shown to foster a greater attachment to school and set the foundation for healthy social, emotional and academic development (Thapa et al., 2013). Staff that are most critical in creating or bolstering a positive community school climate are school mental health professionals (i.e., school psychologists and school counselors). As the school staff that are on the front line for student emotional and behavioral health, school mental health professionals have a unique opportunity to encourage diversity and communication in the student body while ‘educating the educators’ on how to create a cohesive community (Cohen et al., 2009).

In the scope of school climate, safety pertains to the degree of physical and emotional safety provided by the school, as well as the presence and implementation of fair disciplinary practices (Wang & Degol, 2016). Unfortunately, research suggests that students do not feel physically and emotionally safe in schools. This is hypothesized to be due to several lacking contextual variables that improve a school’s climate (Thapa et al., 2013).

Lastly, the instructional environment of a school recognizes its structural and organizational elements. School grounds are part of an environmental dimension that can influence a student's feelings about their physical safety (Thapa et al., 2013). Schools that are well-maintained are believed to have a more positive school climate than schools that are not well-maintained (Tillyer et al., 2011). A growing body of research has also indicated that the school environment can affect a student's academic performance (Uline & Tschannen-Moran, 2008). Altogether, these four categories of school climate encompass nearly every feature of the school environment that could affect student behavioral, cognitive, and psychological development (Wang & Degol, 2016; Cohen et al., 2009; Thapa et al., 2013). A positive perception of school climate is believed to affect a multitude of student outcomes, including academic, social, and emotional development.

### **School Climate Theories**

The school climate dimensions described above—academic, community, safety, and instructional environment—are influenced by Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems framework (Thapa et al., 2013; Wang & Degol, 2016), which posits that human development takes place in the multitude of contexts, including the relationships a child has with their proximal and distal environments (Bronfenbrenner, 1992). One of the noteworthy characteristics of school climate theory research is the way in which individual behaviors are shaped by the school environment (Wang & Degol, 2016). With this in mind, the very essence of Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological theory emphasizes the influence that the multidimensional nature of the environment has on a child's development. Whether the environment be more distal, such as the structure and condition of the outside building, or proximal, like the interpersonal relationships between

students and teachers, both environments influence a child's development (Wang & Degol, 2016). When applied to school climate theories, Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory emphasizes the magnitude of influence that even distal environments can have on a child's developmental process.

Social control theorists use their lens to propose that acts of delinquency or violence are a direct result of weakened social and cultural restraints (Wang & Degol, 2016). Those who believe in and identify with the rules of their society are less likely to break such rules to engage in delinquent behavior. In regard to school climate research, social control theory highlights the importance of quality academic environments that inspire greater commitment and intrinsic motivation to get involved in academic activities (Wang & Degol, 2016). These actions will also help strengthen students' attachment to school and subsequently decreases the likelihood of delinquent behavior. Schools that utilized a social control theory lens found that encouraging student's attachment to healthy behaviors was correlated to decreased unhealthy or risky behaviors, which in turn can increase a student's sense of physical safety (LaRusso et al., 2008).

These two theories address the value in studying school climate within a multidimensional context. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory addresses the importance of distal and proximal environments on a child's development (Bronfenbrenner, 1992). Social control theory stresses how critical it is for students to feel a sense of attachment to their school, as a strong bond with the school community encourages conformity to its rules and conventional norms, decreasing the likelihood of deviant behavior (Wang & Degol, 2016). As the body of research on school climate grows, so does its multidimensionality; more foundational theories of psychology and sociology are realizing the breadth and importance of school climate. Further

research on school climate is needed to deeply understand its effect on student academic, emotional and social development.

### **School Violence and its Effect on School Climate**

As previously discussed, there is general agreement across literature that school climate is a complex, multi-dimensional construct. According to the National School Climate Council (2007), school climate involves the patterns and feelings of school life experiences and norms, goals, values, learning and leadership practices, and organizational structures (National School Climate Council, 2007). Scholars have proposed that school climate is a reflection of the positive or negative feelings had by students and staff about their school environment, and that school climate can have a positive influence on the health of the student learning environment (Kutsyuruba et al., 2015).

Historically, the field of psychology defined mental wellness as the absence of psychopathology (Suldo et al., 2012). Similarly, school safety was originally defined and measured by the presence or absence of weapons and/or homicides in school settings (Skiba et al., 2006). As the body of school safety research grew, there was less focus on reactionary practices and more time and resources spent on the study of intervention and preventative techniques (Kutsyuruba et al., 2015). School climate is believed to be one of the most important variables when understanding school safety, which has helped policy makers develop school safety policies with a larger and multidimensional lens.

Research has shown an inverse relationship between school climate and adolescent mental health. For example, research results from LaRusso and colleagues (2008) suggested that positive student perceptions of student-teacher relationships were linked with lower rates of

student depression and conduct problems. The study also found that adolescents who reported greater social belonging at school were less likely to experience mental health problems (LaRusso et al., 2008). However, if school climate diminishes and rates of violence increase, student mental and behavioral health is likely to decline (Kutsyruba et al., 2015). Not only do perceptions of a positive school climate reduce the likelihood of delinquent behavior, but positive student perceptions of school climate can influence and regulate the influence of internal risk factors, such as self-criticism and poor emotion regulation (Suldo et al., 2012). Students in a positive school climate should be able to interact and communicate with school mental health professionals about their emotional and psychological concerns. School-based mental health staff can help cultivate a positive school climate by improving psychological health and reducing behavioral and emotional problems in the school population (Wang & Degol, 2016).

Research has suggested that students are more likely to voice their concerns or indicate improvements when they feel safe at school. Student perceptions of being in a supportive school climate increases the likelihood of them asking for help from teachers for threats of violence or bullying (Perkins et al., 2019). Additionally, students are more likely to report a decrease in violence when they feel satisfied with the quality of education they are receiving (Lunenburg, 2010). Along these same lines, students who report receiving a high-quality education are more likely to report decreases in violence rather than increases, whereas low-quality education raters are more likely to report increases in violence. Adolescents with strong relationships with their family, friends, and teachers have been found to be more resilient in the aftermath of school violence (Duru & Balkis, 2018). Therefore, improving adolescents' relations with their teachers

and school staff can decrease the risk of poor mental health and bolster the development of resiliency in the wake of violence on school grounds.

Over the past century, the correlation between school climate and school violence has been extensively researched. Similarly, the relationship between school climate and academic performance has been widely discussed for decades, but there has been a gap in literature to support the links between school climate, school violence, and academic performance. Benbenishty and colleagues (2016) identified the causal direction of these variables as being in the opposite direction than what was predicted—that is, high levels of overall improvements in school academic performance predicted better climate and lower rates of school violence (Benbenishty et al., 2016). Specifically, this could look like students achieving higher grades and their teachers presenting more positive relationships with their students as a result, which could lower the rate of school violence. These findings suggest that schools that focus their efforts on improving school-level academics may be indirectly decreasing rates of violence and improving school climate. It also suggests the improved teacher attitudes toward students could also improve school climate, which could serve as a mediating link between academic performance and school climate. However, it is important to note that although the improvement of academic performance may lower the rates of school violence and/or improve school climate, the results are dependent upon the unique variables of each school.

### **Efficacy of School Violence Prevention Programs**

Broadly speaking, most school violence prevention programs teach students alternatives to violence when resolving personal and interpersonal problems. Such programs rely on continuous education and discussion from school staff to change the perceptions, beliefs and

attitudes of students towards violence. It is believed that schools have adopted violence prevention strategies and programs in the wake of infamous school shootings that have taken place throughout the U.S. Although school shootings are statistically rare, the percentage of schools that had a plan in place in the event of a shooting has increased from 79 percent in the 2003-2004 school year to 92 percent in the 2015-2016 school year (Musu et al., 2019). Of that 92 percent, 70 percent of schools reported drilling their students on their safety procedures. On a similar note, a controversial yet effective form of school violence prevention includes the use of security cameras, which increased from 19 percent in the 1999-2000 school year to 81 percent in the 2015-2016 school year (Musu et al., 2019). However, this approach is considered more of an intervention of identifying acts of violence, rather than a preventative approach that strives to deter violent incidents from occurring. Furthermore, such security measures, which are implemented with the intent of reducing school crime and violence, may negatively affect school climate. Specifically, for some students and staff, the measures that are being taken to improve school safety may create an atmosphere of fear or intimidation (Peterson & Skiba, 2000). For example, while security cameras can improve the safety of school climate, it can simultaneously negatively affect school climate by inadvertently inflating students' perspectives of the rate in which violence occurs on school grounds. Aside from physical security measures, there are many school violence prevention programs that address multiple factors that influence violent behavior. Many programs aimed at preventing school violence also discuss the development of social emotional skills, conflict resolution skills, and anger management skills.

### ***School Violence Prevention Programs***

Although there are numerous procedures in place to identify and reduce school violence prevention, the purpose of this study is to analyze school violence prevention programs. The goal of school violence prevention programs includes providing knowledge about violence and conflict, increasing student social emotional intelligence, and teaching students the interpersonal skills necessary to avoid violence (Peterson & Skiba, 2000). In addition to providing information about violence to students, many violence prevention programs also educate teachers and school staff members how to teach their students alternatives to acts of violence. However, many programs with an objective of preventing violence are frequently not exclusively targeting violence or inappropriate behaviors (Peterson & Skiba, 2000). These programs could also be addressing drug and alcohol abuse, poor academic performance, or other relevant areas.

Prevention programs that target school violence can vary in focus. For example, a conflict-resolution curriculum can focus on understanding conflict and how it occurs, as well as teaching negotiation-based responses to conflict. A conflict-resolution intervention can include curriculum that helps to deter verbal and physical conflict before they start. Such programs aim to modify psychosocial processes, such as interpersonal skills and self-efficacy, which are believed to be proximal causes of violent behavior in children (Shuval et al., 2010). Several urban elementary schools in New Haven, Connecticut underwent a conflict resolution intervention that consisted of five workshops: 1) introducing the students to various conflict management practices, 2) reinforcing and providing examples of conflicts for students to allow for analysis of the consequences of different approaches, 3) welcoming discussion on feelings associated with conflict and ways to navigate anger, 4) providing students with opportunities to practice listening skills and highlighting the importance of practicing listening skills in resolving

conflict, and 5) helping students communicate their emotions clearly with their peers and take ownership of their feelings (Shuval et al., 2010). The study by Shuval and colleagues (2010) found a significant decrease in hostile attitudes and behaviors in the students that participated in the conflict-resolution workshops.

Social problem-solving curricula highlights the importance of understanding feelings and teaching student problem-solving or negotiation strategies to deal with interpersonal problems. Similar to the problem-solving approach practiced by school psychologists, the steps involved in this intervention include (a) identifying that a problem exists, (b) defining the problem, (c) generating solutions to the problem, (d) evaluating the solutions and selecting the best one, and (e) assessing the outcome (Daunic et al., 2006). These interventions typically include a variety of role-playing and hypothetical situations. The goal of this intervention is for students to improve their decision-making skills and utilize problem-solving strategies at school and in other environments (Daunic et al., 2006). However, scholars note that just because students learn how to describe solutions to hypothetical situations does not mean that they will apply it to real-life situations (Peterson & Skiba, 2000).

Another strategy used to deter school violence is peer mediation. This intervention provides student mediators with strategies on how to help resolve conflict among peers (Peterson & Skiba, 2000). In this strategy, there must be an impartial mediator that helps the two other disputing parties. The goal of this strategy is to create more “win-win” than “win-lose” situations, meaning that both parties benefit from the solution instead of one party benefiting from the resolution while the other is left with a dissatisfactory outcome (Peterson & Skiba, 2000). A study measuring teacher’s perspectives on violence prevention programs found that the

teachers believed that the peer-mediation programs had successfully taught students problem-solving skills and reduced discipline referrals and school fights (Maring & Koblinsky, 2013).

Many programs that address violence prevention also address other issues that schools may face such as dropping out of school, drug and alcohol abuse, and poor academic performance (Peterson & Skiba, 2000). In other words, many prevention-oriented interventions are ones that are not specific to violence or behavior; rather, they address common behaviors that can affect a variety of possible negative outcomes related to schooling. For example, Second Step, a popular school violence prevention model, targets risk and protective factors of aggressive and violent behavior and includes empathy and communication skills training, social-emotional learning, and problem-solving strategies (Committee for Children, 2020). The Second Step curriculum varies across student age groups, but the Second Step elementary and middle school programs focus predominately on emotion management and interpersonal conflict resolution, which have been shown to reduce youth aggression among elementary youth (Taylor et al., 2017). Although Second Step focuses on school violence prevention, it also addresses bullying prevention, as well as preventing forms of verbal harassment such as homophobic name-calling or sexual harassment perpetration. Schools that were provided with Second Step curriculum were found to have stronger social emotional skills and higher well-being compared to schools that were not provided with a preventative program (Taylor et al., 2017)

When it comes to policy priorities, universal early intervention and prevention of mental health problems are among the key factors to efficacious school violence prevention programs (Humphrey et al., 2016). Providing students with a universal violence prevention program may provide resources that the students may not have access to otherwise. Additionally, universal

programs are more inclusive since they encompass the entire student body (Humphrey et al., 2016). Many universal violence prevention programs also address social and emotional learning (SEL) to prevent or alleviate mental health problems. The PREPaRE model, a crisis-response curriculum published by the National Association of School Psychologists, teaches school mental health professionals and other members of a multi-disciplinary team how to respond to and engage in crisis intervention and recovery (Brock et al., 2016), as well as encourage social emotional learning in schools. The PREPaRE model represents a sequential set of duties when responding to a crisis: Prevent and Prepare, Reaffirm, Evaluate, Provide and Respond, and Examine (Brock et al., 2016). The PREPaRE model also has mental health trainings throughout the program to help school mental health professionals identify warning signs and conduct threat assessments before a crisis occurs (Brock et al., 2016). School mental health professionals are also encouraged to provide individual counseling to students who are exhibiting externalized behaviors to reduce the risk of violence behavior. Another form of mental health accommodation in the PREPaRE model includes anger management and social skills training for students to deter from engaging in violent or delinquent behaviors. The PREPaRE model and other crisis-response programs highlight the importance of mental health and violence prevention by helping students feel valued and supported and having access to mental health programs, respectively (Cowan & Rossen, 2013). Participation in the PREPaRE workshops has been linked to immediate gains in crisis prevention and intervention knowledge, as well as improvement in attitudes toward providing crisis prevention and intervention (Brock et al., 2011).

Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies (PATHS) is another SEL program that concerns providing students with SEL skills such as understanding their emotions, managing

their behaviors, and learning to work well with others (Humphrey et al., 2016). Ursache and colleagues (2012) found that after implementing the PATHS program, their students increased not only their emotional regulation skills, but their overall executive functioning. It is believed that when children use classroom supports to better regulate their emotions, they are more likely to be at an optimal level of arousal that would allow for better executive functioning and overall engagement in learning activities (Ursache et al., 2012).

Researchers have identified several components that influence the efficacy of a school violence prevention program. According to Kutsyuruba and colleagues (2015), more recent prevention programs have focused on emotional health and the prevention of mental health problems. Research has found that school administrators who properly invest their efforts and allocate funds towards initiatives that address bullying and violence found their school environments to be safer and more peaceful for children (Kutsyuruba et al., 2015). In essence, scholars encourage the implementation of school violence prevention programs that include strategies for violence prevention, identification and intervention for at-risk students, and responses to incidences of violence or inappropriate behavior should they occur.

Sometimes, the efficacy of a violence prevention program is unknown, as proper program evaluation research is expensive and is frequently perceived as unnecessary to funders and program developers. The lack of clarity of program effectiveness remains because the majority of programs are exclusively studied as single-program evaluations (Tillyer et al., 2011). Fortunately, many of the available prevention approaches and implemented activities can be used to advance more than one prevention strategy to increase the likelihood of program efficacy (Thompkins et al., 2014). The most effective interventions use a wide spectrum of options that

avoid utilizing punishment and exclusion as the only solution to violent behavior. For example, rehabilitative models are especially popular in schools with higher Black and Latinx populations, as these groups are more likely to face punishments in schools than their white counterparts (Miguel & Gargano, 2017). These rehabilitative models can consist of meditation rooms in place of sending a student exhibiting inappropriate behaviors to the principal's office. Miguel and Gargano (2017) emphasize the importance of addressing the cause that is leading a student to exhibit behaviors, rather than simply addressing the behavior itself.

Most violence prevention programs that have been created within the last decade have focused on the role school climate has on reducing school violence. Beyond this, the many well-known interventions are comprehensive in nature and include content such as conflict resolution skill building, maximum student engagement to increase intervention efficacy, and role playing (Thompkins et al., 2014). Recognizing the role that school violence prevention programs have on school climate, the need to understand how these programs work in schools remains critical.

### **Rurality as a Risk Factor**

According to the Census Bureau, a rural area is defined as a) any county with a population of less than 30,000 people or b) counties with a population greater than 30,000 with a census tract within that county with a population density of less than 200 people per square mile (ArcGIS, 2020). Considering this definition, over 94% of Montana counties qualify as rural areas (ArcGIS, 2020). Further, Montana Office of Public Instruction states that 773 of the 825 public schools in Montana serve less than 500 students per school (Growth and Enhancement of Montana Students, n.d.). Although the number of Montanan students who receive their public education in rural areas is unclear, there is evidence that shows there were more rural than

suburban/urban schools throughout Montana in the 2019-2020 academic year (Growth and Enhancement of Montana Students, n.d.). As a result, these schools are at a greater risk for certain forms of school violence.

Youth can negatively affect their development by engaging in risky behaviors such as aggression, violence, drug use, and dropping out of school. Although this risk-taking behavior remains an issue across the U.S., it is especially prevalent in rural communities (Guo et al., 2015). Rural environments can expose students to stressors that urban dwellers never face, with issues such as geographic isolation and limited community resources (Guo et al., 2015). Despite there being an underlying assumption that rural schools are at less risk for school violence than their urban school counterparts, a national study indicated that rural schools are at as great of a risk for violence as urban and suburban schools (Cotter et al., 2015). Specifically, Mink and colleagues (2005) found that rural teens were just as likely to be perpetrators of violence as assessed by 15 measures of violence-related behavior as compared to urban and suburban teens. In spite of the fact that school violence occurs in rural, suburban and urban communities, there is a lack of focused research on rural schools.

Although the rates of violent incidents are similar to their urban and suburban counterparts, there is little research conducted on what school violence interventions rural schools are implementing and whether it affects their school climate. To date, few studies have examined rural school climates and perceptions of school climate, despite rural adolescents being more likely to engage in risky behavior such as weapon carrying or drug abuse, compared to their urban counterparts (Cotter et al., 2015), which could decrease perceptions of school climate by increasing perceived risk of danger. As anticipated, rural schools have been found to be

significantly smaller, have fewer teachers, teachers' aides and administrators, and spent less money per student compared to urban and suburban schools (Cotter, et al., 2015). This lack of recent research on such a pertinent topic is alarming and highlights the importance of further research addressing the school climate of rural schools.

There are several challenges in providing rural students with the social-emotional and violence prevention supports they need. For one, the rate of poverty is higher among rural youth compared to urban youth (U.S. Department of Agriculture Economic Research Services [ERS], 2020). Critical to this study, rural schools have been found to have fewer violence policies and security practices (i.e., use of security guards, surveillance cameras) compared to urban schools (Cotter et al., 2015). Scholars suggest that rural schools spend less money on security practices and violence prevention strategies due to a lack of financial resources, an issue that is less common in suburban and urban school districts (Cotter et al., 2015). The lower prevalence of school violence prevention strategies in rural schools, in addition to the fact that rural schools have comparable levels of violence to urban and suburban schools, indicates that rural students may be at a heightened risk for school violence. Acts of victimization, such as bullying, are found to be much higher in rural schools, with bullying victimization estimated to range from approximately thirty to eighty percent, compared to national bullying surveys, which are estimated to range from eleven to thirty percent (Guo et al., 2015). These statistics indicate the need for rural youth to be provided with interventions that can reduce victimization and improve overall school climate. Further research identifying the efficacy of school violence prevention programs can create safer schools in rural areas where resources may be lacking.

### **School Violence Prevention Programs and School Climate in Rural Schools**

Considering the unique disposition of rural schools, it can be difficult to identify what violence prevention programs are most efficacious and improve school climate. There is a significant lack of research in this particular field, which makes this study all the more imperative. Research focusing on the general challenges rural schools face include themes such as a lack of resources and training, standardized school protocols, and time to spend with students that are struggling with mental health (Brown et al., 2018). Being a practicing school mental health professional can be especially hard in rural communities due to unique issues, such as a lack of professional development opportunities (Goforth et al., 2017). Given that training on school violence prevention programs and strategies is mostly taught to staff through professional development, it is especially concerning that rural school mental health professionals may not receive further education on how school violence occurs and what strategies can prevent it.

Although there is a limited body of research on school climate and school violence in rural schools, more research has been conducted on school climate and school violence in other settings. Many studies have suggested the importance of prevention programs that address conflict resolution, socioemotional regulation, and mental health (Kutsyuruba et al., 2015; Shuval et al., 2010; Skiba & Peterson, 2000). When students feel respected and empowered, they are more likely to thrive academically and socially and are less likely to engage in acts of violence (Kutsyuruba et al., 2015). This may hold true in suburban and urban areas, where a multitude of studies on school climate and violence prevention programs have been conducted. However, there are no current studies that address school violence prevention programs and school climate in rural communities and, most critically, how this population can be served despite its distinctive geographic and cultural differences. By obtaining information from school

mental health professionals working in rural schools and gathering their experiences with violence prevention programs and school climate, the unique strengths and challenges of this population will be better understood. With more understanding comes advanced intervention programs and supports that can be put in place to help rural schools create a positive school climate and reduce the risk of school violence.

### **Present Study**

The current study sought to explore the relationship between perceived efficacy of school violence prevention programs and perceived school climate using a quantitative approach. Past and current research studies have indicated that acts of violence on school grounds are common and have shown an upward trend in the last decade (Klinger et al., 2019). One goal of the present study was to identify school violence prevention practices and their effect on school climate. Rates of school violence have also been shown to negatively affect academic performance and mental health. Because of this, the present study aimed to gain the perspectives of school mental health professionals, who are frequently working with students struggling with mental health concerns and were believed to have the most experience with incidents of school violence. With further information from school mental health professionals and their experience with school violence prevention practices and school climate, their unique perspectives would be better understood.

A second aim of this study was to identify violence prevention strategies that are implemented in rural schools. Rural schools are at greater risk of being underfunded to implement preventative school violence programs and practices than their urban and suburban counterparts (Cotter et al., 2015). Additionally, students from rural communities are at a greater

risk of engaging in behaviors such as drug use and weapon possession (Cotter et al., 2015), which, in turn, may increase perceived risk of danger. With few studies identifying how rurality can affect school climate, it was the hope of this study to explore how rural communities navigate school violence preventative measures and how these measures affect school climate.

A final aim of this study was to identify what forms of school violence occurred the most often, as perceived by school mental health professionals. Because rural schools may have fewer resources for violence prevention programs and experience higher rates of weapon possession on school grounds, rural schools may be at risk for higher incidents of school violence. By asking school mental health professionals about what forms of school violence are most common, we could identify underlying themes of violence among rural schools in Montana. To obtain these perspectives, we asked questions pertaining to the particular forms of violence that school mental health professionals believe to be most common in their school(s). Given these aims, the following research questions were explored.

### **Research Questions**

**Research Question 1: Do school mental health professionals in Montana who report a perceived efficacy of violence prevention programs also report a positive school climate?**

**H1:** There will be a positive relationship between the mean score of perceived efficacy of violence prevention programs prompts and the school climate composite score as reported by school mental health professionals.

**Research Question 2: Will Montanan school mental health professionals who report fewer incidents of violence in their schools also report a positive school climate?**

**H2:** There will be a negative relationship between the mean rates of school violence and the school climate composite score, with school mental health professionals who report fewer incidents of school violence also reporting a more positive school climate.

**Research Question 3: Will Montanan school mental health professionals that report fewer violence prevention resources also report a poorer school climate?**

**H3:** There will be a positive correlation between the mean rates of school mental health professionals' reports of violence prevention resources and the school climate composite score, with school mental health professionals who report fewer violence prevention resources also reporting a more negative school climate.

### Chapter III: Methods

#### Participants

Participants were invited to complete a survey that was disseminated through the Montana Association of School Psychologists (MASP) and the Montana School Counselor Association (MSCA). Participants were given the incentive of a \$10 Amazon gift card if they were eligible to participate. Three hundred and ninety participants started the survey, but due to attrition and many participants not being eligible for the survey, there were only seventy-five eligible responses. More specifically, over three hundred of the participant responses were eliminated because they provided disingenuous responses (i.e., “trolling) and were not practicing school mental health professionals in Montana. Forty six of the seventy-five participants completed the entirety of the demographic questions, the perceived efficacy of violence prevention programs questionnaire, the School Safety Survey, the rates of violence questionnaire, and the school violence prevention resources questionnaire. The principal investigator decided to incorporate all the eligible participants in the analysis, including those who did not complete the entirety of the survey, to gather the perspectives of as many mental health professionals as possible. Additionally, there is supporting literature to suggest that it would be more powerful of an analysis to incorporate the most data possible when detecting differences in scores (Aberson, 2019).

Approximately 65% of the participants that completed the demographic component of the survey identified as school counselors ( $n=49$ ) and 33% ( $n =26$ ) of participants identified as school psychologists. According to MASP, there are an estimated 150 school psychologists currently practicing in Montana (MASP, 2020). Additionally, the Montana School Counselor

Association estimates that there are 500 practicing school counselors in Montana (MSCA, 2020). Considering the total number of practicing school psychologists and school counselors in Montana, this survey only collected approximately 10% of the Montanan school counselor population and 17% of the Montanan school psychologist population. Considering how the survey was disseminated (discussed below), it is believed that those who completed the survey were eligible participants that serve as mental health professionals in Montana schools. School counselors and school psychologists were selected because they have the most interaction with students and situations that directly pertain to mental health knowledge and support. Additionally, it was predicted that this population would have the most knowledge of their school's climate and violence prevention procedures compared to other school staff.

The principal investigator hoped for a 15% return on the surveys distributed, which would result in approximately 90 participants. A power analysis showed that to obtain a large effect size of .6 with 95% power in a correlational test, the total participant size would need to be 26. Therefore, our goal of over 90 participants was more than adequate. This number of participants could have led to more reliable data and may have provided data for future research. A similarly designed study that examined rates of school violence in several countries was found to have an effect size of .69 with 95% power and a population of 37 (Akiba et al., 2002). With this study in mind, the proposed effect size appeared possible to obtain. Although the principal investigator did not obtain the target number of 90 participants, the study had a total of 75 eligible participants, which was more than the 26 participants necessary for a large effect size with 95% power.

A demographic questionnaire was also administered to better gauge the participants' role and experiences in schools. Participants were asked to answer questions related to their length of time as a school mental health professional, the number of schools and grades of schools they served, the type of community they served, and their gender and racial identity. Approximately 92% of the participants identified as White ( $n=70$ ), with over half identifying as female ( $n=46$ ) and the remaining participants identifying as male ( $n=28$ ; 38.8%). The mean length of time serving as a school mental health professional was 3.38 years ( $n=74$ ). Responses indicated several school mental health professionals served multiple grade levels, with the majority of participants stating they served high schools ( $n=53$ ). Over half of the participants identified their school as rural ( $n=40$ ), although it is important to reiterate that approximately 94% of schools in Montana are considered to be rural according to the federal standard of rurality, which defines rural areas as counties with a) less than 30,000 people or b) a population greater than 30,000 people with a population density of less than 200 people per square mile (ArcGIS, 2020). To better capture whether school mental health professionals were truly practicing in rural schools as defined by ArcGIS (2020), the principal investigator identified the counties in which the school mental health professionals served. Upon reviewing this geographic and school district data, it was determined that 67 of the 75 (89%) participants worked in at least one rural school. Based on this discrepancy between perceived and actual rural schools, it is likely that the participants were unsure whether the community in which they served was rural, urban, or suburban.

## **Measures**

### ***Perceived Efficacy of Violence Prevention Programs***

This section included quantitative measures to capture perceived effectiveness of violence prevention programs in the participants' schools. These questions were created by the principal investigator but were influenced by the U.S. Department of Education School Climate Survey (EDSCLS; Ye & Wang, 2018). Prompts measured the use of evidence-based strategies to reduce school violence, schools' responses to acts of violence, and the use of drills to practice safety procedures. They were asked to respond using a Likert scale (1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree). These questions possessed good reliability as shown by its internal consistency (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .85$ ).

### ***School Safety Survey***

Participants were then directed to the Safe and Responsive School (SRS) School Safety Survey (Skiba et al., 2006). The SRS School Safety Survey is a 40-item self-report scale designed to assess perceptions of school safety and school climate (see Appendix B). The SRS was created to be a comprehensive model of school safety, with the survey drawing on previous national surveys of school violence that emphasize serious violent or criminal acts (Skiba et al. 2006). Participants were given a variety of statements about their school, such as "Students feel comfortable telling a teacher or an administrator about potential violence." The statements were rated on a Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The entirety of the survey was utilized to maintain its strong psychometric properties, with the survey showing strong validity ranging from .83 to .94 and higher levels of internal consistency (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .93$ ;

Skiba et al., 2006). The current sample showed good internal consistency (Cronbach's  $\alpha=.85$ ). In addition, the survey took a comprehensive approach in gauging school climate and safety. The subtests were relevant to the questions being explored in this study, since personal safety, belongingness, incivility, effective learning, and general climate are several factors that are critical to the main research questions. By assessing for perceived personal safety and climate in schools, the principal investigator was able to obtain a more comprehensive picture of what school mental health professionals are experiencing regarding safety and climate, as well as what could be improved within their schools.

### ***Rates of Violence***

Participants were asked to identify the presence and frequency of specific acts of school violence: physical fights and weapon possession. These two forms of violence were chosen due to their hypothesized prevalent nature in rural schools. These questions created by the principal investigator were influenced by the EDSCLS (Ye & Wang, 2018). The participants were first asked to identify whether physical fights and weapon possession occur at their school. The next set of questions asked the participants to estimate the number of incidents they had in the past school year (0-10 incidents, 11-20 incidents, 21-30 incidents, 30+ incidents). These questions showed acceptable internal consistency, with Cronbach's  $\alpha=.70$ .

### ***School Violence Prevention Resources***

The survey ended with several questions aiming to measure the school mental health professionals' opinion of whether their school was equipped with appropriate violence prevention resources. These questions were created by the principal investigator and were also influenced by the EDSCLS (Ye & Wang, 2018). Barriers to effective violence **prevention**

resources included inadequate or outdated equipment, a lack of financial resources for evidence-based programs, a lack of time, and a lack of administrative or district support. Using a Likert scale (1=strongly agree to 5=strongly disagree), participants responded to statements such as “My work in violence prevention is hindered by inadequate or outdated equipment.” The internal consistency for these questions was found to be questionable (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = .60$ ). However, these questions were not all measuring the same underlying construct. Therefore, the low Cronbach’s alpha is less concerning because the questions were examining several constructs, such as outdated equipment, financial resources, and administrative support. Questions two through six were reverse coded to reflect the nature of the questions. For example, Question 2 states “My work in violence prevention is hindered by a lack of materials and basic supplies,” with answer selections ranging from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree. The reverse coding of these questions would allow sum scores to be congruent with other measures used.

### **Quantitative Analysis**

After completing an electronic informed consent to participate, participants completed the demographic questions, the perceived efficacy of violence prevention program questionnaire, the School Safety Survey, the rates of violence questionnaire, and the school violence prevention resources questionnaire. Data were collected through the online survey system Qualtrics. After hundreds of ineligible participants completed the survey, a screener question was implemented to ensure that those partaking in the study were school mental health professionals practicing in Montana. Additionally, to confirm their eligibility, participants were asked to list the schools at which they worked. Otherwise, participants were not asked to assign their name or any

identifying information to their survey. Data were downloaded from Qualtrics and analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics 25.

## Chapter IV: Results

### Research Question 1

To answer Research Question 1, *Do school mental health professionals in Montana who report a perceived efficacy of violence prevention programs also report a positive school climate*, a Pearson correlation was conducted using the sum score of the School Safety Survey and mean score on the perceived efficacy of violence prevention programs questionnaire. It was hypothesized that there would be a positive relationship between perceived efficacy of violence prevention programs and school climate. To conduct this analysis, the mean score of the perceived efficacy of violence prevention programs prompts and the composite score of the school climate prompts were computed. The analysis was significant,  $r(38)=.422, p=.000 (n=72)$ . This result suggests that participants who perceived their school violence prevention programs to be efficacious also reported a more positive school climate.

### Research Question 2

To address Research Question 2, *Will Montanan school mental health professionals who report fewer incidents of violence in their schools also report a positive school climate*, the mean score of the rates of violence prompts was calculated. Next, the sum score of the school climate prompts was calculated. The two scores were then analyzed using Pearson's correlation to identify the association between the two variables. It was hypothesized that there would be a negative relationship between school mental health professionals who report fewer incidents of violence in their schools and those who report a positive school climate. Results of the Pearson correlation indicated that the correlation strength between these two measures was significant,  $r(38)=-.371, p=.012 (n=46)$ . The results suggest that school mental health professionals who

reported fewer acts of violence in their schools also reported a more positive school climate, which is consistent with past research findings (Kutsyuruba et al., 2015).

### **Research Question 3**

To answer Research Question 3, *Will Montanan school mental health professionals who report fewer violence prevention resources also report a poorer school climate*, a Pearson correlation was conducted using the school violence prevention resources questionnaire and the School Safety Survey. It was hypothesized that there would be a positive relationship between participants that reported fewer violence prevention resources and a poorer school climate. The results of the analysis were significant, but instead of a positive relationship, the data indicated that there was a significant negative relationship between reports of violence prevention resources and school climate,  $r(38)=-.505, p=.000 (n=45)$ . However, upon further analysis of the data, there were several data points that were skewed. More specifically, the participant with the lowest reported school climate score (indicating a poor school climate) also reported the highest rate of violence prevention resources. Similarly, a data point with the highest reported school climate score reported fewer school violence prevention resources than 86% of the participants. To further investigate these results, a supplementary analysis was run using an ANOVA to analyze school violence prevention resources and size of school on school climate, with school climate being the dependent variable. The results suggested that the size of school accounted for 17% of the variance of the differences between means and was not significant [ $F(45, 72)=17.35, p=.10$ ].

## Chapter V: Discussion

The current study used a quantitative approach to examine the relationship between school climate and perceived efficacy of violence prevention programs, rates of violence, and school violence prevention resources. The findings for each research question will be discussed below, along with limitations of the current study and directions for future research.

### Research Question 1

The first research question of this study asked, “*Do school mental health professionals in Montana who report a perceived efficacy of violence prevention programs also report a positive school climate?*” It was hypothesized that school mental health professionals who reported higher perceived efficacy of school violence prevention programs would also report a positive school climate. The results of the analysis showed a positive relationship between perceived efficacy of violence prevention programs and school climate. More specifically, these results suggest that school mental health professionals who perceive the violence prevention programs in their schools to be effective also view their schools as having a more positive climate.

The results of this analysis are consistent with previous research findings that effective school violence prevention programs have a positive effect on school climate. These results make sense when considering how the absence of violence can make a school feel like a safer and academically engaging environment. Effective school violence prevention strategies include psychoeducation surrounding social emotional intelligence and teaching students interpersonal skills to avoid resorting to violence (Peterson & Skiba, 2000). Considering the current study’s analysis and previous research findings, it is speculated that school mental health professionals reported efficacious violence prevention programs that consisted of one or more of the following

components: social emotional learning, psychoeducation, and conflict resolution strategies (Kutsyuruba et al., 2015). However, it is unknown what specific components comprised the participants' school violence prevention programs. Further research would be required to identify the specific components of the violence prevention programs Montana schools are implementing.

There are many factors that may contribute to whether a school can implement an effective violence prevention program. Some of the most crucial factors include financial resources, knowledge of staff, and time during the school day. Research has shown that school administrators who invested time, effort and financial resources toward anti-violence programs yielded an abundance of valuable returns and created an environment more conducive for learning and healthy development (Kutsyuruba et al., 2015). However, not all school districts have the same access to these resources. Fortunately, partnerships between schools and community organizations that support student social and mental well-being could be strengthened and provide necessary student resources to which schools may not otherwise have access.

Scholars have emphasized that school climate has a large effect on the nature and scope of school violence and prevention practices (Greene, 2005). However, results from Research Question 3 suggest that not all schools utilize a violence prevention program. As a result, future research needs to focus on the factors and strategies that promote readiness to plan and implement the most effective violence prevention practices. Schools are generally ill-equipped in conducting needs assessments and monitoring the progress of an intervention (Greene, 2005). Without this knowledge, there is little hope that evidence-based programs will be appropriately

and correctly adopted and implemented. Future research that focuses on field studies is necessary to create and disseminate guidelines or templates for schools to follow.

Because the results of this research question suggest that the school mental health professionals perceived their violence prevention programs to be effective, one can assume that the programs used are more comprehensive than programs that simply “put out fires”, or programs that exclusively handle crises when and as they occur. Successful school violence prevention programs incorporate components such as social emotional learning, which has been shown to positively affect students’ academic and social success in school (Committee for Children, 2020). However, it is important to note that the efficacy of school violence prevention strategies can be limited by cultural influences. The perceived lack of fit between a program and the needs and values of its adopters can act as a significant barrier to the effectiveness of the program. In fact, results from several independent randomized trials suggest that multiple countries have found social-emotional intervention programs to be ineffective within their specific culture and context (Humphrey et al., 2016). Universal violence prevention programs should therefore consider the transferability of their curriculum for other cultures and how their intervention could be perceived in other communities. At the school level, school mental health professionals who advocate for school violence prevention programs should monitor the efficacy of the program through progress monitoring, as research suggests cultural components of programs may not always be appropriate for all settings (Humphrey et al., 2016). For a violence prevention program to be most efficacious, it should meet the needs and goals of a school, as well as be culturally congruent with a school’s norms and values. These needs and goals can

only be best identified by those who are working on the front line of a school when crises or acts of violence occur.

### **Research Question 2**

The second research question asked, *“Will Montanan school mental health professionals who report fewer incidents of violence in their schools also report a positive school climate?”*

The principal investigator hypothesized that there would be a negative relationship between the rates of violence and reported school climate. The results of this analysis supported the hypothesis since a negative relationship was found between these two measures.

Despite school violence being widely prevalent throughout the world, analyses have shown that rates of school violence are not necessarily related to the crime rates of the surrounding community (Akiba et al., 2002). Considering this, the need for a positive school climate and safe atmosphere becomes more critical to decrease the rate of school violence. Further, studies have not been able to identify general patterns of violence in a society as being contributors to rates of school violence, suggesting that school violence may not be a direct reflection of crime rates in the same environment (Akiba et al., 2002). However, based on this study’s findings, there is no way of knowing whether school rates of violence are reflective of those committed in the community. Although research suggests there is no relationship between school and community violence, providing students with preventative programs and strategies to reduce rates of violence can only be beneficial to their academic and psychological development. Future research should identify perceived community rates of violence and compare such rates to the perceived school rates of violence to better identify whether community violence is a risk factor for school violence in rural schools.

It is interesting to also reflect upon the role gun culture may have in schools or in their neighboring communities, especially those in rural areas. Considering the potential influence of gun culture in rural areas, along with participants in the current study reporting low rates of school violence and a positive school climate, suggests the presence of additional, and perhaps protective, variables. There are previous research findings that suggest that other protective, contextual factors could be involved in decreasing weapon possession, such as parental involvement and perceived safety on school grounds (Cotter et al., 2015). Such factors should be considered when other studies have found the likelihood of weapon possession is higher in regions of the U.S. with a stronger adherence to gun culture (Felson & Pare, 2010). The nature of the gun culture in Montana is unclear. It is difficult, if not impossible, to determine whether gun carrying reflects the prevalence of guns in the culture or the tendency to carry guns for self-protection; both of which are more prevalent in Western and Southern regions of the U.S. (Felson & Pare, 2010). Consequently, it is important to consider the impact weapon possession can have, even when carrying without malicious intent, on student mental health and perceptions of school safety.

### **Research Question 3**

The last research question asked, “*Will Montanan school mental health professionals who report fewer violence prevention resources also report a poorer school climate?*” It was hypothesized that there would be a positive relationship between violence prevention resources and school climate. However, the results of the analysis showed a statistically significant negative relationship between the two variables, indicating that a more positive school climate was associated with fewer violence prevention resources. Although this was an unexpected

result, it can be supported by considering a factor that was not measured in the analysis: size of school. Depending on the school environment, the size of a school may serve as either a protective or risk factor for school violence prevention resources. Schools lacking necessary resources is not a new problem, as most states have provided less support per student for elementary and secondary schools for over 15 years (Leachman et al., 2016). This leaves schools with poorer local funding at a disadvantage, as they have less accessible resources for their students and staff. Although many states and school districts have identified having goals of boosting student achievement, state and federal financial cuts make educational reforms such as reducing class sizes, increasing student learning, and improving student and teacher relationships nearly impossible. (Leachman et al., 2016). The significant funding cuts can inhibit smaller schools' abilities to implement any of these reforms that would not only improve academic achievement but would also likely improve school climate.

Another possibility for the reported low rates of school violence prevention resources and high rates of school climate in this population is a school's perception that they do not need to have school violence prevention resources. Research has shown that smaller schools tend to offer an environment that is more conducive for community and family involvement and better understanding of issues of learning, diversity, and building community relationships (Bingler et al., 2002), which are all critical components of a positive school climate. Considering this, because of a (perceived) positive school climate, school staff may not see the need to select, purchase, and implement comprehensive violence prevention programs. It is also possible that school administration do not perceive violence to be a threat to their school; as a result, they may decide to bypass violence prevention programs and resources that they deem as unnecessary.

Additional research is warranted to more closely study how school mental health professionals serving small schools with positive school climates feel about school violence prevention resources.

Further, based on these findings, the need for violence prevention resources and how they affect school climate may be unique to each school. There may be other factors that influence school climate more than the access to school violence prevention resources. Considering the results of this analysis, these two factors need to be further investigated with a larger sample size. Relatedly, studies have indicated that smaller schools have fewer resources for school violence prevention programs, but also report higher rates of learning, an important component of school climate (Chen & Weikart, 2008). Additionally, another theory posed by researchers is whether smaller schools have lower rates of violence. Although there has been inconsistent research in whether this relationship exists, it is important to consider this idea when reflecting upon the data collected in this study. The data from this study could indicate that school mental health professionals perceive their smaller schools to be safe despite having a lack of violence prevention resources.

Considering the demographic data of the participants studied, it is possible that the size of the school(s) was an additional factor that affected the amount of school violence prevention resources that school mental health professionals reported to have in their schools. Further, Benbenishty and colleagues (2016) studied any possible causal links between school climate, school violence, and academic performance. The results of this analysis identified a negative relationship between characteristics of school violence prevention resources and school climate in high schools. The findings of these studies suggest a need for a more in-depth exploration

regarding the differential effect of school climate on rates of violence, as well as a need to identify other variables that may be affecting these factors.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

Despite promising findings that help to fill the critical gaps in literature, there are several limitations to this study. The first limitation pertains to the population. Due to the non-random sampling methodology and study design, generalizability of the findings is limited. The participants recruited for this study were exclusively practicing school mental health professionals in Montana. As a result, the findings can only be generalized to states with similar demographics.

Another limitation is the questions used in the School Safety Survey. Because of its quantitative nature, the amount of information participants could share was limited. More specifically, question ten is comprised of the statement, “I have seen a gun at school” with answer selections ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The recorded answers varied greatly, with some participants reporting they had never seen a gun at school in the last school year, while others responded in varying degrees to which they saw a gun at school. Given the nature of this question, it is hard to extrapolate deeper meaning of the answers without having any contextual information regarding the situation in which the school mental health professional witnessed a gun at school. It would be beneficial to gather more in-depth information and obtain additional context to the answers the participants provided. As a result, future research should consider utilizing open-ended questions and engage in qualitative analyses to acquire further information that Likert-scale and quantitative questions cannot obtain.

A supplementary analysis was run to further investigate Research Question 3 by using an ANOVA to analyze school violence prevention resources, school climate, and size of school. The results of this analysis showed that size of school accounted for 17% of the variance and was not significant. This suggests that there are other variables that could be influencing the outcomes of this analysis. Further information could be helpful in identifying whether the size of a school has implications on rates of school violence prevention resources and school climate. Future studies should also consider the numerous variables that can be influencing each other and should isolate variables to better understand their relationships.

Another limitation pertains to the ambiguity of what constitutes a rural school. As discussed earlier, it appears that many school mental health professionals were not sure whether their school was rural, suburban, or urban. The school districts provided by the participants were researched to determine their state of rurality according to the Census Bureau definition. After further analysis, it was determined that 11% of participants worked at an urban school. Although this is a relatively small percentage, it is important to remember that there is a higher student concentration at urban schools compared to rural schools. More specifically, some school mental health professionals serving at rural schools reported less than 250 students in their school district, whereas school mental health professionals serving at urban schools reported over 1,000 students in their school district. Future studies should attempt to only collect data from school mental health professionals that are serving in rural areas (as defined by the Census Bureau) and exclude those who are practicing in urban areas.

Additionally, future research should consider using measures that use a standard score to calculate perceived efficacy of violence prevention programs, school rates of violence, school

violence prevention resources. This would provide stronger psychometric properties and could allow for different statistical analyses. For example, instead of using a Pearson correlation, the possibility for an ANOVA or regression model could produce more information pertaining to each variable and how they influence each other.

An additional limitation to this study is the limited number of participants that fully completed the survey. Although all the seventy-five eligible participants' responses were analyzed, it is important to consider that only forty-six of them completed the survey in its entirety, suggesting the possibility of gaps in the collected data. To obtain a more comprehensive picture of the current perceptions of school mental health professionals, future research should consider obtaining a larger sample size or encouraging participants to fully complete the survey.

Lastly, it is important to note the subjective viewpoints school mental health professionals may have regarding school violence prevention practices and rates of violence in their school. The school mental health professionals were asked to provide their perspectives on The School Safety Survey and other implemented measures, rather than their school's statistics or factual information. Although this study was purposefully designed this way, it is possible that the responses were influenced by their biases or experiences. With that in mind, there is no way of knowing whether the respondents' answers were accurate depictions of their school's violence prevention programs or rates of violence. Future research should consider collecting rates of violence through Office Discipline Referrals or other administrative documents to obtain a more accurate rate of school violence.

### **Implications for Montana Schools**

The findings of the current study highlight the importance of a positive school climate in reducing violence in Montana schools. More specifically, the results further suggest that school climate is strongly related to perceived efficacy of violence prevention programs and rates of school violence. In schools where climate is perceived to be poor, a paradigm shift in relationships between teachers, staff, students, and the community is critical. This requires a fundamental change in beliefs regarding school discipline and what makes a school a safe environment. Many researchers encourage schools to adopt a whole-child approach to education, which is based on the idea that children's learning depends on the combination of instructional, relational, and environmental factors the child experiences (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018). Additionally, based on Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, school professionals should consider that child development occurs in several environments, ranging from distal to proximal influences (Bronfenbrenner, 1992). As a result, educators should understand how developmental processes interact and unfold over time if they seek to improve the school environment for better development and learning. Additionally, although it is simpler to adopt general trends in development, it is crucial to emphasize that each child develops differently as a function of their unique qualities and families, community, and classrooms (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018). Considering this, schools should be designed to attend to the unique needs of individual children while supporting general trends of development in other children. As a result of improving school climate, schools may not only expect a reduction in rates of school violence, but may also see an improvement in overall academic performance (Benbenishty et al., 2016).

It is critical for school administrators to understand how rural schools can quickly become a catch-all for students struggling with mental health, as there can be barriers to accessing care in a rural state. Relatedly, youth violence increases the risk for poor mental health (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020), which can be difficult to treat in an area where access to care is geographically limited. Further, school violence has historically limited the ability of school administrators to create a healthy learning environment (Wynne & Joo, 2011). Thus, an increase in rates of violence can negatively affect not only school climate, but also individual student mental health. Considering that many of Montana's counties have limited access to mental health support (Summers-Gabr, 2020), there is the risk that students' mental health needs will be overlooked. Schools could consider providing students with appropriate mental health care can, in turn, be a violence prevention program strategy. By helping students understand and process their emotionality, the risk of acting out in violent ways can decrease, which can ultimately protect the mental health of other students.

Besides improving school climate, another tactic to reduce school violence that scholars have suggested is the implementation of stronger discipline-management systems. This concept does not necessarily propose that more severe punishments would result in lower rates of school violence. Rather, a study using data from a national sample of schools showed that all schools make use of rules, regulations, and policies to reduce problem behavior, but commonly fail to consistently and clearly implement these rules and consequences (Gottfredson & Gottfredson, 2001). In the same study, results showed that many schools employ individualized strategies to prevent problem behavior, such as individual counseling or instructional programs, instead of implementing a universal intervention to improve the psychosocial climate or quality of

interactions among individuals in the school. With this in mind, it is believed that the majority of schools identify school violence as an issue of individual-deficit behavior, rather than considering environmental influences that may affect student behavior. Schools hoping to reduce school violence should consider implementing universal school violence prevention programs, as they are more inclusive and encompass the entire student body (Humphrey et al., 2016).

Many rural schools continue to remain in a unique position of geographic isolation, weapon culture, and sparse resources. Mental health staff receive less training, have lower hiring requirements, and are available for fewer hours each week in rural schools compared to their urban and suburban counterparts (Mink et al., 2005). However, it is important to understand why these disparities exist, which can be different according to each school's circumstances. If a rural school has fewer resources available for staff training, funding should become a priority. However, if rural school administrators perceive a lower need for violence prevention programs, then raising awareness of the problem and risk of school violence could motivate a re-allocation of training for mental health care staff (Mink et al., 2005). Chronic underfunding of violence prevention programs is an issue that sometimes cannot be solved within just the school district. Consequently, it may fall on the school mental health professionals to advocate to their local or state government for proper school violence prevention resources.

Despite rural schools being at a great disposition for certain forms of violence, school districts may argue the financial insensibility of spending thousands of dollars on school safety programs or strategies when it is believed such violence would never occur at their school. Additionally, it is difficult to calculate whether a program or strategy truly deterred an act of violence from occurring. In this case, it is important to share current statistics regarding the

prevalence and impact school violence can have on a school and its surrounding communities. Looking at studies that have collected pre/post perceived rates of violence and perceived school climate can provide a measure of how safe students and staff feel on school campus after an intervention has been implemented. The implementation of a school violence prevention program is likely to positively affect school climate, which can deter acts of violence. Although some forms of violence occur more frequently than others, it is best practice to be prepared to intervene when or if a crisis occurs. The implementation of such programs will not only reduce the likelihood of acts of violence from happening, but it can also improve the school climate by improving teacher and student relationships, increase feelings of safety and security, and improve academic and mental health outcomes.

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## Appendix A

### Demographic Questionnaire

1. What is your highest degree earned? (Masters [MS, MA, Med], Specialist [EdS, SSP], Doctorate [PhD, PsyD, EdD], Other)
2. How many years have you worked in the field as a school mental health professional? (0 years, 1-5 years, 6-10 years, 11-15 years, 16-20 years, 21+ years)
3. What is your position at this school? (School Psychologist, School Counselor, Social Worker, Other (please fill in))
4. With what grade level(s) do you currently work? (Check all that apply) (Pre-K, K-5, 6-8, 9-12, College)
5. What is the approximate ratio of school psychologists to students within your district? (1:500 or lower, 1:750, 1:1000, 1:1500, 1:2000, 1:3000, 1:>3000)
6. How would you describe the current type of community in which you work? (Check all that apply) (Urban, Suburban, Rural)
7. What is the size of the district you serve? (Please estimate, if applicable) (Less than 250 students, 250-999 students, 1,000-1,999 students, 2,000-4,999 students, 5,000-9,999 students, 10,000 or more students)
8. How many schools do you serve? (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 5+)
9. Please list the names of **all** the schools that you serve and their corresponding district(s) and/or cooperative(s).
10. What is your racial background? (Check all that apply) (White Non-Hispanic, African American, Hispanic, Native American, Asian or Pacific Islander, Biracial or Multiracial, Other, Prefer not to Disclose)
11. What is your gender? (Check all that apply) (Female, Male, Non-binary, Transgender Female, Transgender Male, Intersex, Prefer not to Disclose)

## Appendix B

### Efficacy of Violence Prevention Programs Prompts

**Please answer using the following scale: Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, Strongly Agree)**

1. I believe the violence prevention program(s) we use at our school are effective in reducing violence on school grounds.
2. The strategies and programs we use to reduce school violence are evidence-based.
3. Our school violence prevention program(s) makes our school safer.
4. I believe that our school appropriately reacts to acts of violence on campus.
5. I believe our school successfully uses school violence prevention programs (e.g., Second Step, PATHS, positive behavioral supports and interventions, bullying prevention programs) that deter acts of violence.
6. I believe that our school successfully uses violence prevention strategies that deter acts of violence (e.g., cameras, glass windows to increase visibility, hall monitors, locked doors).
7. I know what procedures to follow if there is a dangerous situation during the school day (e.g., violent person on campus).
8. We have drills to practice what procedures to follow if there is a dangerous situation during the school day (e.g., violent person on campus).

## Appendix C

### School Climate Prompts (SRS School Safety Survey)

**Please answer using the following scale: 1=Strongly Disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Neutral, 4=Agree, 5=Strongly Agree)**

1. I feel safe before and after school while on school grounds.
2. Students use drugs and alcohol outside of school.
3. Students enjoy learning here.
4. I feel as though I belong at school.
5. Most students have a good relationship with their teachers.
6. This school provides instructional materials (e.g., textbooks or handouts) that reflect students' cultural background, ethnicity and identity.
7. At this school, the students get along well with the staff.
8. This school is an inviting work environment.
9. Students feel comfortable telling a teacher or administrator about potential acts of violence.
10. Students are generally treated fairly at this school.
11. Most students are getting a good education at this school.
12. Parents are involved in activities at school.
13. Teachers work hard to make every student successful.
14. Most students are proud of this school.
15. Teachers have input in decision making at this school.
16. Teachers care about student learning at this school.
17. Teachers and administrators supervise the halls during passing time.
18. Teachers praise students when they have done well.
19. Teachers enjoy teaching here.
20. Parents are made to feel welcome at this school.
21. I am proud of this school.
22. Administrators listen to what teachers have to say.
23. Name calling, insults & teasing happen regularly at school.
24. Students respect teachers in this school.
25. Parents are made to feel welcome at this school.
26. Students use alcohol or drugs at school.
27. I am proud of this school.
28. Students regularly cheat on tests or assignments.
29. Students cut classes or are absent regularly.
30. Overall, I feel that this school is a safe school.
31. I have seen students with drugs or alcohol at school.

32. Administrators listen to what teachers have to say.
33. I feel safe when I am in my classroom.
34. Robbery or theft of school property over \$10 in value is common.
35. Students are generally treated fairly at my school.
36. Sale of drugs occurs on school grounds.
37. Students cooperate with teacher requests.
38. Physical fighting or conflicts happen regularly at school.
39. Most students are getting a good education at this school.
40. Threats by one student against another are common at school.

## Appendix D

### Rates of Violence Prompts

1. The following types of problems occur at this school: physical fights among students.  
(1=Never, 2=Rarely, 3=Sometimes, 4=Often)
  
2. The following types of problems occur at this school: student possession of weapons.  
(1=Never, 2=Rarely, 3=Sometimes, 4=Often)
  
3. Per school year, how frequently did the following form of violence occur at this school?  
(Please estimate, if applicable)
  - a. Physical fights (0-10 incidents, 11-20 incidents, 21-30 incidents, 30+ incidents)
  
4. Per school year, how frequently did the following form of violence occur at this school?  
(Please estimate, if applicable)
  - a. Weapon Possession (0-10 incidents, 11-20 incidents, 21-30 incidents, 30+ incidents)

## Appendix E

### School Violence Prevention Resources Prompts

1. I believe my school has all the resources necessary for our violence prevention programs. (1= Strongly Disagree, 2= Disagree, 3= Neutral, 4= Agree, 5= Strongly Agree, N/A=Not Applicable)
2. My work in violence prevention is hindered by a lack of materials and basic supplies. (1= Strongly Disagree, 2= Disagree, 3= Neutral, 4= Agree, 5= Strongly Agree, N/A=Not Applicable)
3. My work in violence prevention is hindered by inadequate or outdated equipment. (1= Strongly Disagree, 2= Disagree, 3= Neutral, 4= Agree, 5= Strongly Agree, N/A=Not Applicable)
4. My work in violence prevention is hindered by a lack of financial resources. (1= Strongly Disagree, 2= Disagree, 3= Neutral, 4= Agree, 5= Strongly Agree, N/A=Not Applicable)
5. My work in violence prevention is hindered by a lack of administrative or district support. (1= Strongly Disagree, 2= Disagree, 3= Neutral, 4= Agree, 5= Strongly Agree, N/A=Not Applicable)
6. My work in violence prevention is hindered by a lack of time to implement a prevention program. (1= Strongly Disagree, 2= Disagree, 3= Neutral, 4= Agree, 5= Strongly Agree, N/A=Not Applicable)