BRIEF REPORTS


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ABSTRACT: Violence in United States' schools is epidemic. Solutions are rare. Community mental health centers are now being challenged to become part of the solution. The Montego Bay Secondary School project presents an example of how violence reduction can be achieved using almost no physical resources and the special effect, called the "Bruno Effect", created by one Jamaican police officer with the consultation of a psychodynamically-led training and intervention team. The "Bruno Effect" resulted in a dramatic reduction in the number of physical attacks from an observed 5 fights per day (3 out of the 5 involved knives and cutting) to 1 per week. The violence rate returned immediately to its former level as soon as "Bruno" left the school. The dramatic violence reduction appears related to establishing an adult protective shield. Results stem from the unique personality of the adult protector, as well as a combination of the special role of the police and the outside intervention team.

INTRODUCTION

The primary community mental health response to violence has been limited to dealing with the victims or perpetrators in schools. The typical mental health worker functions as a traditional extension of the clinical role performing mediation (Friedlander, 1993), awareness train-

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ing (Brooks, 1993), anger management (Eggert, 1994), and group work using the Mainstream Model of Social Work with Groups developed by C. Papell and B. Rotham (Haran, 1988). The emerging trend toward a more trans-disciplinary approach to school violence (Simpson, 1991) takes the position that the mental health worker is part of a school-based team.

This paper challenges community mental health workers to take on new partnerships with police and teachers in the schools to reduce violence.

THE MONTEGO BAY SECONDARY SCHOOL

This school was a remarkably violent one located in Montego Bay, Jamaica. It has over 2,400 students attending daily classes in two shifts. The school teachers were overwhelmed by the sheer lack of resources and increasing burdens of teaching a more violent and growing number of children with classes averaging 70 students in classrooms without doors.

The violence pattern at the school typically resulted in 5 fights per day with at least 3 of them involving a weapon. Approximately 20% of the female students reported to the JCF officer that they felt sexually bullied by a boy at school. 75% of the students were not attending classes on any one day. Many of the students came to school, but refused to go to class. Before the JCF officer, there was no way to insure that the students went to class. When he first began, he was seeing 4–5 parents per day for disciplinary reasons (1995, personal communication with Aldith Wright); this pattern of violence was also verified by teachers (1994, personal communications with Felix Hunter) and school administrators (1994, personal communications with Mrs. Solomon, then, Principal at Montego Bay Secondary School).

The problem began to escalate at the Montego Bay Secondary School until February of 1992 when a psychodynamic intervention described more fully in Twemlow & Sacco (1994, 1995) began to involve the Jamaican Constabulary Force in a violence prevention program stressing the concepts of “Gentle Warrior,” a version of community-oriented policing.

The community intervention was composed of 100 hours of training to 75 JCF police officers and multiple outreach programs targeting the Montego Bay Secondary School, Blossom Garden (state-run orphanage), Westhaven Children’s Home (private residential program for handicapped children), and CUMI or Community Uplifting of the Men-
tally Ill (a private community mental health program working with the homeless mentally ill). The intervention team was led by a psycho-analytically-oriented psychiatrist assisted by a team consisting of social workers, psychologists, a child psychiatrist, a police superintendent, police lieutenant, martial artists, special education teachers, and a police stress expert. When the intervention began, the relationship between the police and the community was hostile and police morale was at a dangerously low point. One of the JCF participants in the violence reduction seminars was the police officer assigned to the Montego Bay Secondary School. The school project described herein grew from the application of the principles taught in the seminars. The bulk of the incidents of violence in the school derived from lack of discipline which resulted in the bullies running the school, especially when students were not in class or were between classes. In the first six weeks of the program, the JCF officer confiscated several hundred weapons, patrolled the school to insure class attendance, and let it be known to the student population that any violence would be taken very seriously by the JCF officer. Six weeks later, violent incidents dropped dramatically to less than 1 per week, with both students and teachers reporting feeling safer at school (A. Wright, Personal Communication, 1992).

Within the first year of the 2 year intervention at the school, less than 2% of the female students felt sexually bullied at school (Personal communication with Aldith Wright, 1995). This dramatic decrease stemmed, in the JCF officer’s opinion, from students not being allowed to be on the school grounds without being in class. Attendance at class in the first year rose from 25% to 60%, and then to almost 80% in the second year. Parents needing to come to school with their children decreased from 4–5 per day to less than 2 per week.

**THE “BRUNO EFFECT”**

The intervention at Montego Bay Secondary School had several phases. First, it stressed focusing on one discipline issue (boys and girls tucking in their shirts and blouses). Anyone who was brave enough to keep their shirt out would quickly get a verbal response from the Jamaican Constabulary Force (JCF) officer. This response did not have to be threatening, but was firm, immediate, and simple: “Tuck your shirt in.”

Second, the JCF officer also led a clubhouse for the young people at the school. This clubhouse was organized with a formal meeting focused on violence prevention and life skills together with recreational
sports like soccer. He used the clubhouse to develop a core group of students who became active as his information and support network in the school. He organized this group of mostly unruly problem male students into an “honor group”. It should be noted that these groups provided a balance to the intervention at Montego Bay Secondary School. The clubhouse was open every day. The intervention’s seminar faculty were able to generate enough charitable contributions to begin to outfit some of the recreational programs at the school.

Third, the JCF officer sent a very clear message to the student populations that weapons would not be tolerated. He would conduct random classroom searches and weapons were immediately confiscated. Most students carried weapons because they felt unsafe on the way to school and during the unstructured times at school.

The JCF officer was able to create a mythical protecting figure that became known as “Mr. Bruno”, a characterization which indicated, according to local folklore in Jamaica, a fierce and protective guard dog (not an attack dog). The police officer began to have an impact even when not present at the school. The “big stick” aspect of the intervention included the searches and discipline focus. The involvement of a “softer” approach included the clubhouse and organizing sports.

It was the blend of these two approaches that provided a growing cooperative network of students, school personnel, and the JCF officer. This network became a way to mediate ongoing aggressive conflicts as well as provide a highly reliable information network. Violence often erupts after a long, slow build up at school. The honor group network offered the JCF officer an opportunity to mediate before trouble broke out. Similar approaches have been used in the United States (Keene & Smith & Sidwell, 1992).

Fourth, the JCF officer assumed the community mental health worker role of outreach therapist working with the student’s parents on school violence issues and to explain disciplinary actions. The following example illustrates how simple family contact brought about a profound change in a female bully at school.

A 15 year old female was involved in daily physical battles with both students and teachers. She was not going to classes, and when she did go, she would be in a fight with either a student or a teacher. The JCF officer intervened insisting that the girl take him to her mother. The mother was “living with friends” in a very unstable community environment. She was informed of her daughter’s behavior at school. The mother responded by detailing how she had been displaced from her house on captured land (property not legally obtained, but seized for personal use) by a former boyfriend. The JCF officer accompanied the mother to the home, and met with the boyfriend. The JCF officer mediated a settlement by
accepting 2 cash payments from the former boyfriend for the mother's use. This resulted in the daughter's having money for lunch and some proper shoes and clothes for school. Within a short period of time, the daughter's behavior changed from the female school bully to one of "Bruno's" honor students.

The JCF officer reported routinely investing his own money to buy shoes and other essentials to allow students to come to school with a measure of dignity. It should be noted that the JCF were very poorly paid, and "Bruno's" investment of his slim resources in the students highlights the personal commitment needed. It is impossible to teach this skill or require it in a job description, it requires a carefully selected individual with high levels of enthusiasm and altruism.

AFTERMATH

The successes noted in this school violence reduction program quickly evaporated with the departure of the JCF officer. His replacement could not create the mythological protector or "Bruno" effect. Within weeks of his departure, the school violence quickly returned to approximately 5 major violent episodes a day including fist fighting, weapon attacks, and rape. Attendance plummeted to 25%, and females were again not going to school or classes because of the sexual bullying.

The JCF was contacted upon the officer's departure. A new officer was immediately assigned, but the effect created by the "Bruno" was not transferable to just any other officer. A follow up visit to the JCF and the school clearly demonstrated that a traditional patrol role returned when "Bruno" left. The JCF police administration could not mandate—as part of duty—the motivation and intensity that was the hallmark of the previous JCF officer.

It seems that the positive effects of "Bruno" were highly personal attributes assumed by a strong—not punitive—social control role model. These personality traits have been described as the key ingredients of a PEACEMAKER (Twemlow and Sacco, 1995), and borrow heavily from the ethics of the Bushido Warrior Code: altruism, self-control, discipline, and honor. The personality characteristics of "Bruno" include: high enthusiasm, low sadism, low narcissism, low need for self gratification at work, and high ethical standards and idealism. The identification and recruitment of peacekeepers should include methods that involve discovering individuals who are already active in the community, and attracting them to join well-supervised teams in strategic interventions.
The Principal reports that the major problems returned because "Bruno" was not there checking weapons and insuring that students went to their classes. The special honor students had no role model and their interest stopped immediately with the removal of the strong protective role model. The school bullies returned and recaptured the school. The JCF officer left to work in the United States in juvenile corrections.

The observed Bruno effect involved more than just a personality, but seems to involve the connection of this dynamic figure to an outside resource (the intervention team) that offered guidance, support, and materials. This dynamic inside-the-institution force and the psychologically-minded-outside-resource appear to be the key engines driving the effect. Either one in isolation does not result in the observed result.

The dramatic reduction in violence in this extremely violent, very under-resourced school demonstrates a quick early response that does not extend beyond the presence of the protective person and support team. Thus, success appears related to not only choosing the right protector, but also selecting the outside team with the needed experience and vision, and insuring that the team stays connected beyond the initial dramatic effect.

REFERENCES

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