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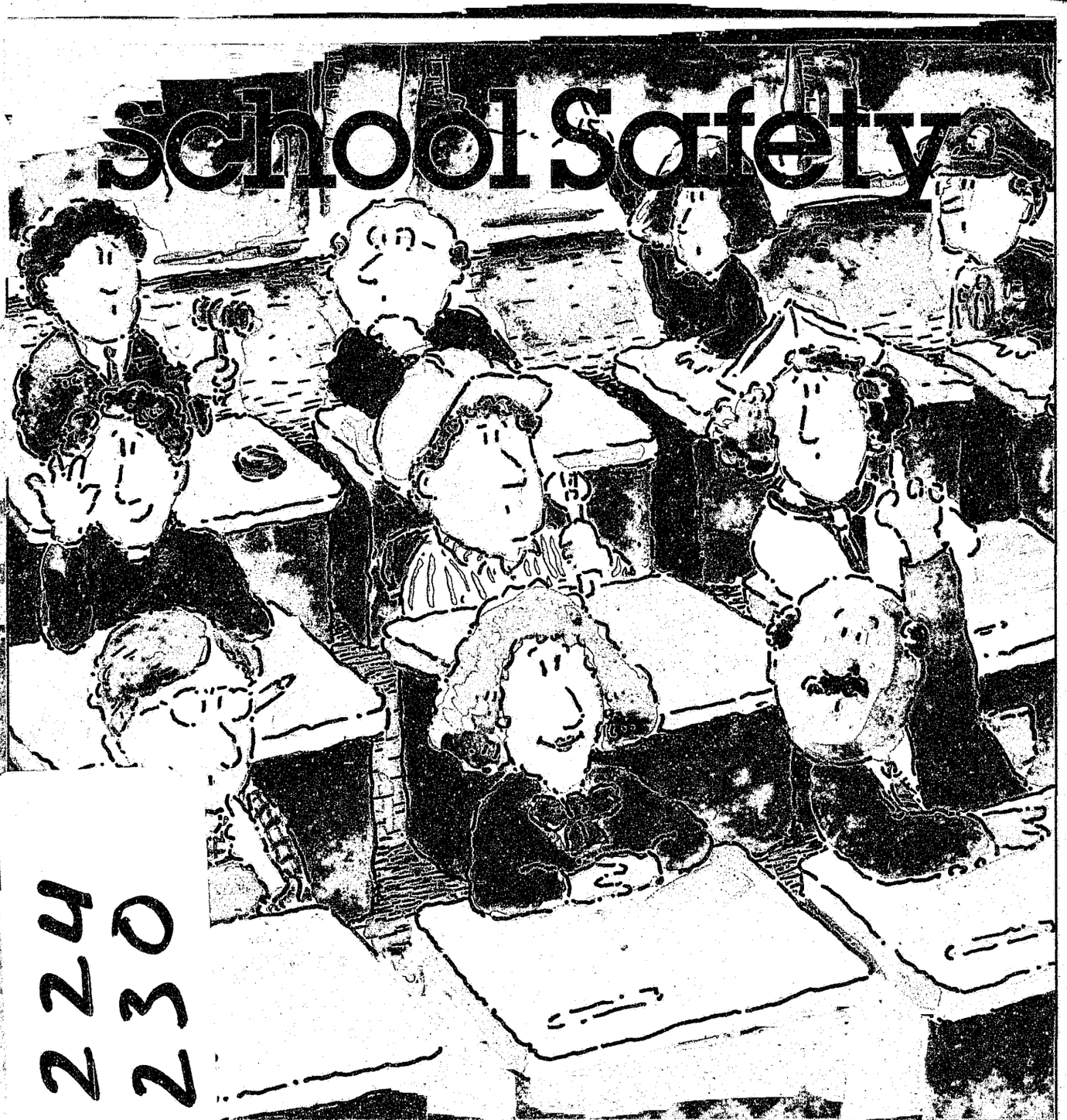
School Safety



Crime Prevention Building Partnerships

NATIONAL SCHOOL SAFETY CENTER

Pepperdine University's National School Safety Center is a partnership of the U.S. Department of Justice and U.S. Department of Education. NSSC's goal is to promote school safety, improve discipline, increase attendance, and suppress drug traffic and abuse in all our nation's schools.

School Safety

School Safety is published by the National School Safety Center to communicate current trends and effective programs in school safety to educators, law enforcers, lawyers, judges, government officials, business leaders, the media and the public. Publication dates are September (Fall issue), January (Winter issue) and May (Spring issue). Annual subscription: $9.00.

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About the cover:
Schools are benefiting from a resurgence of community involvement — from private citizens, commercial businesses and public agencies — stimulated both by positive school-public relations and, unfortunately, by a series of crime-related crises. Illustration by Deborah Zemke, Copyright © 1988, NSSC.

CONTENTS

BY JUNE FEDER

Helping school crime victims past their indignation and sense of vulnerability has presented New York school officials a challenge tantamount to crime prevention.

Crime's aftermath

Pat, a 35-year-old teacher with 11 years of experience, was alone in his classroom, preparing work for the next day, when he heard a knock on the door. When he opened it, three intruders shoved him back inside. As he tried to fight back and scream for help, one told him to shut up because he had a gun and another punched him in the face, shattering his glasses.

After they left the room, Pat, shaken, got up, checked that the corridor was clear, made his way to the principal's office and told him, "I was just assaulted. Masked intruders. Be careful. They may have a gun."

The principal immediately left Pat, explaining that he had to "set things in motion." In the meantime, an assistant to the principal came in, got ice for Pat's injury and asked him to fill out accident reports. Pat filled out forms for the next hour as he was moved from office to office.

When the police arrived, they had him fill out more forms that he didn't really understand and which, at the time, he felt too overwhelmed to ask about. Later, he left the building — again on his own — to visit his doctor. When he called the school to tell them that he would be out for a few days to recover, his immediate supervisor said, "The best thing to do when you fall off a horse is to get back in the saddle," adding that Pat had an obligation to return in order to reassure people who were worried about him.

This scenario is not unusual. During the 1987-88 school year, the United Federation of Teachers School Safety Committee reported more than 2,500 incidents against staff members in New York City, including more than 600 assaults, more than 700 instances of harassment and 10 sex offenses. While teachers found these incidents devastating enough, they also reported that the treatment they received afterward constituted additional injury and lengthened their recovery period. Victims said they were ignored, left in offices by themselves, asked to fill out confusing forms without assistance, unaccompanied to emergency rooms even when it was ascertained that family members would not be present and, in general, treated as if they were the criminal rather than the victim.

This article's purpose is threefold. First, it discusses typical responses of assault victims, including short-term, medium-range and long-term reactions, with examples drawn from work with teachers who have been assaulted at school. Second, the nature of social support in the aftermath of the victimization experience and how the reactions of others impact the victim's course of recovery is examined. Finally, the article looks at what might be done to help victims of school crime and offers a brief description of the UFT Victim Support Program.

The subjects in this article are New York City staff members who have been assaulted in or around school, or who were victims of serious incidents of harassment (e.g., had a gun pointed at them or were robbed at knife point). Some participated in the author's doctoral research and others have received services from the Victim Support Program. In all cases, identities have been disguised.

Effects of victimization

Research on victims of all kinds, including victims of rape, domestic violence and other types of crime, has found that individuals react in surprisingly similar ways to such traumatic events. In fact, studies indicate that victims experience a series of reactions, which Bard and Sangrey, authors of *The Crime Victim's Book*, divide into three distinct stages of response.

The first stage, called "impact," includes those reactions that occur in the hours and days following the event. It is

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characterized by feelings of disorganization, vulnerability, helplessness and physiological disturbances. In essence, "the victim falls apart inside" — that is, the individual experiences a sense that his or her intactness and integrity have been shattered. Reactions include feelings of shock, disorientation, disbelief, numbness and emotional detachment, which Symonds in his work has called "frozen fright." Other reactions can be a feeling of physical immobilization, confusion, loneliness, uncertainty, dependency, childlike behavior and susceptibility to others' influence.

Individuals also experience sleep disturbances, such as the inability to fall asleep, trouble staying asleep and nightmares. Additional physical reactions include muscular tension, stomach upset, cramps, diarrhea and fatigue. These symptoms can last for days, weeks or even months after the assault.

As these reactions subside, individuals enter the second stage of response, called "recoil," which typically lasts from three to eight months after the event. This is characterized by the victim's struggle to adapt to the violation and by an excess of distressing emotions, including depression, fear, phobic reactions, anger, pervasive feelings of self-blame and the perception of blame by others. Depressive reactions can include loss of appetite, sleep disturbance, self-neglect and addictive behavior. One teacher, in the aftermath of an assault, reported the resumption of heavy smoking and drinking patterns that had been under control prior to the incident.

Fear reactions can include fear of the assailant; fear of vulnerability and assault by others; fear of certain places, such as the building, corridor, hallway or even the neighborhood in which the event took place; general fear of being mugged; greater fear in the home; and greater concern about security. Expressions of anger can include anger at the assailant and revenge fantasies. For example, one victim reported that she would love to see her assailant "six feet under in a steel box with double padlocks and tons of dirt dumped on top to make sure she never comes back." Sometimes victims turn their anger against people other than the assailant, such as co-workers, friends, family members, school officials and criminal justice personnel.

Expressions of self-blame are widespread for teachers who have been assaulted. These include statements finding fault with some aspect of their behavior, such as "I should have talked my way out," or finding fault with an aspect of their character, such as saying they had been "too confident" or "too aggressive." The predominance of self-blame seems related to the individual's shame and embarrassment about being attacked by the very person he had been trained to serve and whom he expected to, at least, respect his authority.

The victim faces the difficult task of dealing with these disturbing reactions and, at the same time, defending against them. Frequently, these two dynamic processes alternate in a way that has been described by Bard and Sangrey as the "waxing and waning of tension." Victims are dealing with the experience when they talk about it; when they replay the scene, sometimes over and over; and when they have dreams related to the experience or expressive of emotions that they are tackling.

On the other hand, defending against emotions can involve evidence of denial, such as a return to work before physical recovery; an unwillingness to talk about the attack; and a preoccupation with outside activities, such as fixing up the house or pursuing criminal proceedings, which can replace dealing with feelings.

Like many victims, teachers who have been assaulted often display the symptoms of defending against emotions. For example, they speak of being less interested in students and feeling more distance from them, and of a tendency to approach their work in a more mechanical way. Several talk about "going through the motions," with a clear retreat from affective experience.

For most victims, symptoms gradually dissipate within six months to a year after the traumatic event. Victims then enter the third, or "reorganization" phase, characterized by the individual's attempts to assimilate and integrate the experience. When such coping is successful, individuals will speak of experiencing strength and confidence from "getting through" the ordeal; of making life-changing plans; and of tackling long-neglected problems. However, when coping is not successful, individuals experience prolonged, chronic and debilitating reactions.

Social support

The kind of help the victim receives in the event's aftermath can significantly affect an individual's experience of what happens after the assault and the course of recovery. Stein noted in a 1980 volume of *Evaluation and Change* that "the person who experiences crisis without adequate emotional support runs a relatively high risk of suffering long-term disabilities."

Although victims sometimes receive adequate help in their crisis, most often they do not. Victims report that people tend to ostracize, avoid, become angry at and even abuse them. Symonds noted this tendency and called it the "second injury" since victims are injured twice — first by their assailant and then by the society that the victim perceives as rejecting them.

Symonds and others have attributed this phenomenon to the "universal fear of contamination" that the victim appears to evoke and that interferes with the demonstration of empathy toward the injured person. Perceiving others as victims is threatening because it seems to impinge on the need to believe in one's own "unique invulnerability," Perloff maintains. This is particularly true when the victim is viewed as being similar to oneself, as is the case with a family member or co-worker.

In addition, the victimization experience frequently floods those around the victim with feelings of vulnerability,

helplessness and loss of control similar to those that the victims themselves describe. Those around the victim need to restore an "illusion of control." That need, in addition to the need to reduce one's sense of vulnerability, leads to the tendency to "blame the victim," to react as if the victim were at fault. Furthermore, victims frequently attempt to relieve their own sense of chaos by blaming themselves and, thus, feeding the corresponding need in others.

A second work-related factor that appears to intensify the "second injury" effect is the victim's proximity to others, both physically and psychologically. School employees share close quarters and often perform the same tasks. If a teacher is assaulted in a hallway or classroom, for example, others tend to feel more vulnerable about experiencing something similar. They then look for a "mistake" on the teacher's part to account for what happened.

The result is that, at a point of crisis when victims might expect compassionate assistance from others, they frequently find that they are, at best, ignored and often treated with gross insensitivity. For example, one victimized teacher reported that when the police arrived on the scene and picked up the assailant for questioning, they placed him in the same room where she was filling out forms. When he began to behave rambunctiously, they handcuffed him to a chair in her view. And when the assailant refused to take his summons, they placed it in the book bag he had used to strike the teacher.

Another victim reported that, following the assault, the head of security insisted on questioning her about her actions leading to the attack. When the assailant later called the school and threatened to shoot her in the head, she asked to be relieved from late evening assignments and the same person accused her of malingering.

Symonds also has noted that victims often tend to perceive non-support where neutrality or even acceptance is exhibited on the part of others. This distortion arises from the individual's extreme state of neediness, which sometimes requires an unusual level of skill and sensitivity on the part of others and is not always available. It also can be a result of the victim's tendency to project his or her overwhelming sense of rage.

Individuals who are victimized at work have special problems that exacerbate the second injury. The first problem is that an assault on a worker often represents a breakdown in a system, such as a security failure, a breakdown in a relationship with another teacher, or an environment that fosters violence and provocation. Even when the assault does not represent a breakdown, individuals in that system — particularly administrators and supervisors — feel concern that the attack will reflect adversely on them. Such individuals may feel it is safer to focus on the victim rather than on the conditions that may have led to the victimization.

This explains, in part, reports by teachers that their principals and supervisors often tried to minimize their fears and concerns, ignored them when they returned to work, or refused to return phone calls when they were at home. One teacher reported that when she returned to work, her principal gave her a dirty look and walked away.

Researchers have noted that the expression of anger or behavior helps the victim restore the sense of power lost by the victimization. As noted earlier, victims commonly have fantasies of revenge. Some teachers also prepared to take legal action, which seemed to address their desire for revenge.

However, victimized teachers tend to view an assault as a professional failure. As one individual noted, "I was relieved to find out that the assailant wasn't a student in my class because I would have considered that a terrible failure." Because of this sense of failure, teachers often experience guilt about their rage and their powerful fantasies and, therefore, they have special difficulties expressing anger at their assailants. After all, in every case, their assailants also were students whom these teachers had devoted their professional lives to serving and whom they had been trained to understand and deal with objectively, even when the student exhibits disruptive or difficult behavior.

It is not surprising that the victimization experience, which brings powerful feelings to the surface, also arouses professional conflict. Even in cases where individuals pressed charges, teachers felt torn between their desire to see the assailant punished and their wish to see him helped. In one case, in which a teacher had been badly assaulted and the assailant was awaiting sentencing, the victim expressed concern that, "Maybe he's being seriously hurt on Riker's Island."

Effective help for victims

Effective ways to help victims are just starting to be investigated. Research and subsequent counseling experience with victims of school crime point to various trends and suggests certain strategies.

First, certain "critical periods" seem to exist after the assault during which the individual feels particularly vulnerable. The perception of support (whether helpful or not) during those times appears to color the victim's view of the entire experience. While critical periods vary from individual to individual, common points of increased vulnerability include: the immediate aftermath of the incident; visits to doctors or emergency rooms; initial encounters with family members or friends; the return to work; and encounters with criminal justice personnel, including court appearances.

During these times, the individual must cope with surges of painful feelings and memories. When helpers are protective, nurturing and attentive to the individual's needs (e.g., when they listen, make time for the victim, provide needed assistance and respect the victim's privacy), the social support serves as a buffer against the onslaught of powerful emotions, reduces feelings of isolation and helps coping strategies. In contrast, when the individual feels that

others are insensitive, self-involved and blind to his needs, the victim's feelings of isolation and helplessness intensify and he or she is unable to mobilize effective coping strategies.

Second, while victims require special attention to their needs, they often are unable to articulate those needs. Following the assault, for example, teachers found themselves asked to do things that they later reacted to with outrage and disbelief. For example, they said that they let themselves be shuffled from office to office, allowed individuals to challenge their actions toward the assailant, or didn't object to spending long periods of time filling out forms. Effective helpers need to be aware that the victimization experience creates strong feelings of dependency which prevent individuals from asserting themselves in response to even unreasonable requests or actions on the part of others.

In addition, helpers need to be aware that the victimization experience blocks focusing and that the victim needs help in identifying his or her needs, which can vary. For example, some victims need to talk about what has happened. In contrast, others seem to require a period of time to live with their feelings before they are able to share them with others. Helpers have to refrain from pressuring the victim to "open up" — in fact, to refrain from doing much of anything — until the victim is ready. This often presents conflict for helpers since they want to relieve their own feelings of helplessness by doing something for the victim.

Third, victims also need clear and accurate information about things such as what work-related procedures to follow, and what their contractual and legal rights and options are, as well as how to get speedy follow-through on all appropriate requests for information. It was striking how often the victim's feelings of anger and isolation were intensified by the lack of access to information such as details about the disposition of the case or reasons for delayed paychecks when the victim was out of work.

Fourth, victims also need validation for their behavior and feelings following the assault. Many victims find themselves feeling and acting in uncharacteristic and distressing ways. For example, one teacher was so frightened after an assault that she refused to leave her house for many days. Victims need to feel that others also have experienced intensely distressing feelings and have acted in uncharacteristic ways.

Fifth, some victims require transfers to different work settings, usually from schools where assault is more frequent and/or where support is not as available and a sense of individual shame and embarrassment about the event prevailed. In those cases, a transfer often facilitates recovery by minimizing the effects of the second injury.

Finally, victims need others to remain aware of their own reactions toward victims, so that those feelings won't interfere with their capacity to be of assistance.

Victim Support Program

The United Federation of Teachers' Victim Support Program helps victims of school crime in New York City deal with the aftermath of serious incidents. This support includes individual and group counseling, crisis intervention, referrals to other agencies and services, and, with the help of the School Safety Committee, technical assistance and information.

The goal is to help individuals cope with those aspects of their reactions that may interfere with their adequate functioning and to assist victims in resuming their personal and professional lives. All services are free of charge to individual members and all communication is strictly confidential. □

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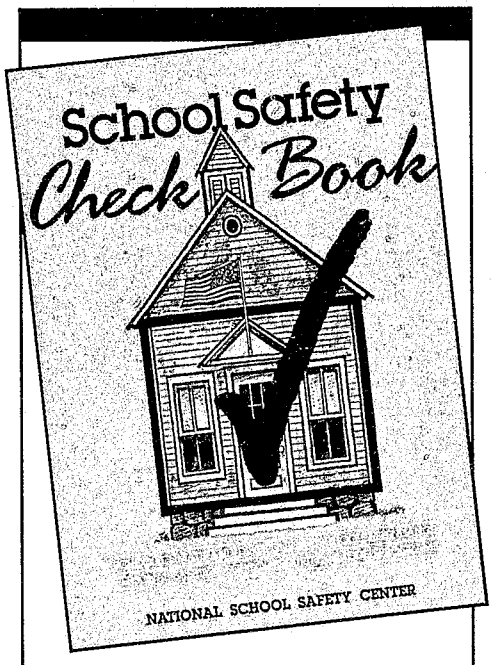

Promoting safe schools is the theme of the *School Safety Check Book*, published by the National School Safety Center, which is replete with practical suggestions for educators to help ensure a positive educational climate.

The *School Safety Check Book* is designed as a practitioner's handbook. Chapter I, "School climate and discipline," suggests ways to assess school climate and how to address problem areas. It offers administrators and teachers guidelines for developing an effective school discipline plan.

Chapter II, "School attendance," examines the reasons students are absent and eventually drop out of school, giving strategies for increasing attendance. Chapter III, "Personal safety," shows how schools, working in cooperation with parents, law enforcement, social service agencies and other community members, can promote the health and safety of children. Chapter IV, "School security," describes the role school law enforcement or campus security personnel can play, as well as outlining other methods in making campuses physically safer and more secure.

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