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## Assessing Instrumental Weapons Violence against Teachers

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## Assessing Instrumental Weapons Violence Against Teachers

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**ABSTRACT** Violence against teachers is a prevalent problem and a critical issue to address. The types of violence and aggression teachers experience vary widely, and weapon violence is among the most serious forms of harm. While there has been extensive research on weapon carrying and traditional weapon use within schools more generally, there has been little investigation into instrumental weapon violence against teachers. The current study utilizes qualitative survey data to investigate contributing conditions related to teacher's experiences of instrumental weapons violence through directed content analysis. Results from this study aim to expand our understanding of the nature and nuance of teacher-directed instrumental weapon violence.

### INTRODUCTION

Violence against teachers is a consistent concern for communities across the United States. McMahon and colleagues (2014) found eighty percent of 2,998 K-12 US teachers reported experiencing at least one type of victimization during the current or previous year. Of all types of violence, non-physical violence has been more commonly reported than physical forms of violence (Longobardi et. al, 2019). In a meta-analysis on student violence against teachers, Longobardi and colleagues (2019) identified the common forms of violence in descending order

of frequency as obscene gestures, offensive remarks, verbal violence, damage or theft of personal property, intimidation, physical attacks, and sexual violence. While students are the most common types of aggressors, parents, colleagues, and strangers have also been identified as potential instigators of violence (McMahon et. al., 2014). Further, violence against educators negatively impacts teachers' physical and emotional health, creates feelings of fear in the workplace, damages teacher's functioning (Wilson et. al., 2011), and is associated with

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disempowerment and teacher turnover (Peist et al., 2020). The far-reaching effects of this destructive phenomenon warrant immediate attention.

The most intrusive aggressive incidents reported by teachers involve weapon-related violence. Most school violence research has focused on gun violence and weapon carrying in schools, and this literature is overwhelmingly focused on student perspectives. For example, a nationally representative longitudinal study of an average of 14,768 U.S high school students per selected year indicated a reported gun carrying rate of five to six percent from 2001 to 2011 in a given 30-day period (Ruggles & Rajan, 2014). There is limited information available concerning other types of weapon threats and use, especially in the context of teacher-directed violence. However, Khoury-Kassabri and colleagues (2009) found nearly 8% of middle and high school students used a chair, rock, or other object to hurt other students. Additionally, 2% of participants used their teeth or a chair to harm a teacher (Khoury-Kassabri et al., 2009). While these findings indicate a relatively small presence of nontraditional weapons, more research is needed to understand the nature and prevalence of this type of violence in schools. A first step is to examine conditions that contribute to weapons use.

#### Theoretical Framework

Brennan and Moore's (2009) weapon carrying and weapon use pathway model is conceptualized based on existing weapons violence theories. This path-model depicts relationships between psychosocial and motivational factors, weapon carrying, and active weapon use. Psychosocial factors, such as individual characteristics and socialization, contribute to instrumental and/or expressive motivation. Instrumental motivation suggests an interest in engaging in a violent behavior for a specific purpose, such as protection, coercion, and/or harm. Expressive motivation involves emotional and impulsive violence. The current study adapts Brennan and Moore's (2009) model to incorporate factors specific to teacher-directed instrumental weapon violence. We propose that contributing conditions (individual, social, and environmental) contribute to motivation

(expressive, instrumental), which contributes to weapon behavior (use, threat, carrying).

#### Contributing Conditions

##### *School Climate*

Contributing conditions involve the individual and ecological factors that can influence an act of violence or aggression. School climate factors are crucial for understanding the etiology of weapon behaviors in schools. Fighting, threats, and bullying at school are related to higher levels of school safety concerns for students (Kim et al., 2020). In general, when students feel unsafe at school, they are more likely to carry a weapon. In a 2019 study, Johnson and colleagues indicate that higher levels of school efficacy and school security can moderate the effect of low self-control on student weapon carrying and use. Further, the relationship between fear of crime and weapon carrying is dependent on level of school security (Johnson et. al., 2019). Higher levels of school security and school efficacy can reduce the likelihood of weapon carrying and use (Johnson et. al., 2019). Taken together, these findings indicate students may choose to carry weapons as a means of protection, which may exacerbate weapon carrying by creating additional safety concerns for other students. An administrator's mode of support and discipline can set the tone of a school's climate. In high violence communities, principals who consistently reinforce procedures, discipline, accountability, and an inclusive environment increase their ability to prevent violence (Astor, Benbenishty, Estrada, 2009).

##### *Individual Factors*

The individual characteristics of the aggressor and the teacher can influence the likelihood of weapon violence. In descending order of frequency, teachers have reported weapon violence from students, parents, colleagues, and strangers (McMahon et. al., 2014). Gender has been found to be an influential factor in the likelihood of teacher-directed violence; male students are more likely than female students to engage in weapon violence against teachers (McMahon et. al., 2014). Additional predictors of weapon violence may include relevant aggressor diagnoses, special education status, and various

academic characteristics. While not all aggressors experience mental illness or have a diagnosis, aggression is tied to various psychiatric disorders through their effect on executive dysfunction (Holler & Kavanaugh, 2013). Though literature concerning the connection between psychiatric disorders within student populations and teacher victimization is sparse, an understanding of its relationship to aggression can shed light on a potential trend. Kaplan (2005) studied more than 200 incidents of school violence and found that compared to general education, special education students were more likely to use threats against other special education students. In addition, students with disorders related to emotional disturbances were responsible for 50% of reported cases, despite only making up 10% of the study sample. These findings indicate more research is needed to understand the role of emotion regulation in incidents of teacher-directed violence.

Academic and discipline factors also influence one's risk of engaging in weapon related behavior. Among youth surveyed in California drop-in centers, number of school suspensions was indicated as the strongest predictor of weapon carrying (Blumberg et. al, 2009). Previous research also suggests skipping school is a predictive factor of weapon carrying (Kulig et al., 1998). These findings suggest a correlation between missing class time and a student's likelihood to carry a weapon to school, though there are likely many additional factors influencing this relationship. Conversely, positive attitudes towards education can protect students from engaging in such behavior. A 2016 study assessing national survey data from the late 1990s found high educational aspirations protect against participation in weapon related behaviors among African American and Latinx students (Shetgiri, Boots, & Cheng, 2016).

#### *Social Factors*

The socialization of an aggressor, including community, peer, and home influences, can contribute to the likelihood of teacher-directed violence. For example, socialization among peers can place individual students at risk for participating in weapon related behaviors. Shetgiri and Colleagues (2016) identified the

presence of violence exposure and peer delinquency as a predictive factor for White and African American 7th - 12th graders in a study on weapon related behaviors. Further, evidence suggests weapon carrying among an individual's friend group can increase their risk of weapon carrying. Dijkstra and colleagues (2012) conducted a longitudinal study among over 400 American 10th grade students and found having friends who carry weapons was a predictor of weapon carrying one year later. Additionally, misbehavior and weapon carrying among peers have been identified as risk factors (Johnson et al., 2019; Rountree, 2000). There has been substantial research concerning the effect of bullying among peers on weapon carrying. For example, Esselmont (2014) found that previously victimized students of bullying were more likely to have carried a weapon in the last 30 days among a nationally representative sample of American 6th - 10th graders. Additionally, perceived level of safety at school was a predictor of weapon carrying. These findings suggest that peer to peer victimization can influence the number of weapons found on school grounds, further elevating the potential for teacher victimization. Parenting and home factors can impact the potential for weapon carrying within schools. Continued exposure to stressful life events, a family history of mental illness, and witnessing of violence have been positively linked with student weapon carrying (Johnson et. al., 2019; Kodjo et. al., 2003; Kulig et. al., 1998). In addition to environmental and individual factors, a range of antecedents or preceding events can alter the nature of a violent incident.

#### *Antecedents*

Antecedents are the precipitating or observable events that often occur immediately before the victimization incident and are described as the direct cause. Types of antecedents include academic performance (e.g., failing an exam) and teacher actions or interventions (e.g., discipline, directives). Although the types of triggering events that precipitate teacher-directed weapon violence remain unclear, antecedents of general teacher-directed violence have been identified. McMahon, Peist, and colleagues (2019) found discipline (25%), directives (19%), breaking up a fight (16%), and de-escalation (13%) were the

most common antecedents of physical aggression in a sample of 193 teachers. Similarly, in a sample of 98 teachers, discipline (44%), teacher directives (27%), and academic performance (14%) were the most frequent precipitators of verbal aggression (McMahon, Davis, et al., 2019).

### Motivational Factors

Motivation can be categorized as instrumental and/or expressive (Brennan & Moore, 2009). Research on instrumental aggression in schools has generally focused on peer aggression such as bullying. Lenzi and colleagues (2014) found that instrumental social goals serve as a mediator in the relation between perceptions of teacher unfairness and peer bullying. Thus, it is possible that perceptions of fair treatment from teachers may play a role in explaining student instrumental aggression against teachers. Student perceptions of teachers' acts of unfair treatment have been linked to a loss of legitimate authority or influence within the classroom (Tyler & Lind, 1992). A perceived loss of teacher authority may embolden an aggressor to act against a teacher's directive when they believe they are being treated unfairly. Perceptions of unfair treatment can contribute to feelings of anger and frustration while increasing the perception that dominating behaviors, such as violence, are acceptable (Lenzi et al., 2014). Such findings suggest a connection between teacher actions and the perceived acceptability of instrumental violence as a means to achieve a goal; there is a need for further investigation to understand this relationship in more depth.

### Rationale

Utilizing directed content analysis of qualitative survey data, the current study aims to investigate the contributing conditions found in teachers' experiences instrumentally motivated weapons violence from a subset of cases. The goals of this study are to 1) identify common forms of instrumental weapon aggression directed toward teachers and 2) identify the common contributing factors associated with various types of instrumental weapon aggression. Results from this study will inform our understanding of the contributing factors and underlying motivation for weapon violence against teachers. This

information is useful for providing support and security for teachers and aggressors who are most at-risk for these violent incidents.

## METHOD

### Participants

This study yielded initial responses from 3,403 participants who answered at least one survey question. Of these responses, 417 teachers in the sample qualitatively indicated that their most upsetting incident of teacher-directed violence involved a weapon. Within this subset, 205 participants reported an instrumental motivation for the weapon violence, including: challenges to authority, issues with academic performance, peer pressure. This study examines the 31 participants who reported unique or "other" experiences of instrumental motivation that were not associated with academic, peer or authority factors, but clearly calculated or planned. One of these participants reported two distinct events of weapon violence which were separated into individual incidents. As such, 31 participants, and 32 incidents were analyzed in this study.

### Procedures

Data for this study were collected through an anonymous, online, self-report survey assessing teacher experiences of violence and aggression created by the American Psychological Association (APA) Classroom Violence Directed Against Teachers Task Force. Prior to data collection, the study received Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval from University of Illinois. The APA Center for Psychology in Schools and Education partnered with the American Federation of Teachers, the National Education Association, and state level education associations to distribute the surveys via email and electronic newsletters and to promote survey participation. The survey directions informed participants of the project's IRB approval and that submission of the survey indicated consent to participate.

### Measures

The online survey included quantitative questions about their victimization experiences and four open-ended prompts inquiring about their most

upsetting experience of violence or aggression. The qualitative responses to these open-ended questions were the focus of this study. The prompts included:

- 1) “Please think about all of the times when you were the target of verbal or physical aggression or intimidation in your school. Can you describe what was the most upsetting incident that happened to you in your role as a teacher?”
- 2) “In your own words, please explain why you think this incident happened.”
- 3) “How did this incident impact your view of your current teaching position?”
- 4) “Please provide any other information that may be important to note in the incident described.”

#### Qualitative Analysis

##### *Model Derived from Data*

Based upon a review of current literature of school weapon violence and preliminary themes emerging from our data, Brennan and Moore’s (2009) model was simplified and adapted. An iterative process of model development was pursued in which the model informed our interpretation of the data and the data informed model adaptation. The adapted model includes contributing conditions, motivational factors, and weapon behavior. Contributing conditions include environmental, social, and individual factors that influence the precipitation of a violence incident. This can also include antecedents or events or behavior directly preceding an incident. Motivational factors are described as the reasons or intentions that incite the violent behavior and whether the violence is perpetrated in an expressive or instrumental manner. Weapons behavior is considered the carrying, threat, or use of a weapon in a manner that could cause harm to others. The current study will focus on the relationship between the first two factors: contributing conditions and motivation.

##### *Coding*

Utilizing the adapted weapon-related violence framework, a preliminary codebook structure was developed. The data was then coded across responses to the four prompts regarding teachers’ most upsetting experiences via open coding by a team of two student researchers. Through this process, subcategories within each primary section were identified, and a three-tier hierarchical coding structure was developed. Participants were coded for all relevant codes that appeared within their response. Thus, some participants were coded for multiple contributing conditions or types of motivation. Subsequent classification, criteria, definitions, and examples for each code were established through an iterative process. Before the entire dataset was coded, the two student researchers achieved inter-rater reliability ( $Kappa = .83$ ) on 10% of the data per the recommended process to obtain reliability (Lacy & Riffe, 1996). All coding was completed in NVivo version 12.

Instrumental motivation in this study was defined as “premeditated, planned, or calculated weapon use or threats and/or weapon incidents”. Instrumental motivation was subdivided into five subcodes: 1) Issues with academic work or environment, 2) Challenge or disrespect for authority, 3) Peer pressure, 4) General social factors, and 5) Other instrumental aggression. Other Instrumental Aggression was defined as “aggression perpetrated to achieve a result not affiliated with peer relations, academic performance, or challenges to authority.” Participants ( $n=31$ ) who were coded for Other Instrumental Aggression were analyzed in this study.

##### *Incident and Weapon Type Codes*

Incidents were examined for details concerning the direction of the violence (either purposefully directed toward the teacher or not purposefully directed toward the teacher) and if the weapon made contact with the teacher. This included responses in which the weapon was *directed at the teacher* with a) contact; b) no contact; or c) contact was unknown. Responses also included weapon violence that occurred but was *not specifically directed at the teacher*, and either made contact with the teacher or did not make contact with the teacher.

Codes were further broken down based on type of violence including weapon carrying, weapon threat, and weapon use. Weapon carrying involves possessing a weapon and moving it from one location to another (e.g., a student had a gun in their backpack they brought from home). Weapon threat is the utilization of any type of weapon to threaten harm to an individual. A weapon threat can be physical (in which the weapon is present during the incident, such as holding a chair up to threaten a teacher) or verbal (in which the aggressor verbally refers to a weapon, such as verbally indicating they will stab or shoot a teacher). Weapon use is the use of any tool or object in a manner that causes or may cause injury (e.g., throwing a chair at a participant). While these forms of weapon behavior were typically coded exclusively, there were instances where more than one of these forms of weapon behaviors occurred within the same incident (e.g., threat with a weapon present and weapon use). Weapon type had three subcategories: traditional, repurposed, fabricated, and unknown weapon. A traditional weapon is a weapon, such as a gun or knife, made with the intent to cause harm. Repurposed weapons are objects that are not expressly made with the intent for harm but are used by the aggressor in a manner that can threaten or cause harm without transforming the object itself (e.g., pencils, scissors, rocks). Fabricated weapons are objects transformed or altered in some way to advance their potential to cause harm, such as the blade of a pencil sharpener. Unknown weapons are items identified as weapons, but the exact type of weapon is not revealed in the response.

### *Analysis*

In order to further understand the data in this subset of participants, qualitative responses were initially examined and coded inductively. Following literature review and model adaptations, additional codes were developed. Then data were examined through directed content analysis to assess potential patterns and clusters of behavior with primary attention towards capturing contributing conditions influential to the incident (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Cases were sorted by contributing conditions and evaluated for common themes. Events could be counted for multiple contributing

conditions to capture the nuance of each case. The most prevalent themes were selected for this paper.

## **RESULTS**

### *Incident Type*

In this sample, three categories of weapon behaviors were identified: weapon use ( $n=16$ ), weapon threat ( $n=10$ ), and weapon carrying ( $n=6$ ). These cases were further examined for directionality and contact in relation to the participant. Weapon use cases primarily used repurposed weapons (e.g., pencils, chairs;  $n=11$ ), followed by traditional weapons (guns, knives;  $n=2$ ), fabricated weapons (sharpened wood and broken glass;  $n=2$ ), and unknown weapons ( $n=2$ ). Among threat cases, weapon types include traditional (e.g., guns, knives;  $n=7$ ) and repurposed (pencil, scissors;  $n=2$ ). Of weapon carrying reports, weapon types include traditional (e.g., guns, knives;  $n=5$ ) and fabricated (broken pencil sharpener;  $n=1$ ).

### *Contributing Conditions*

There are a range of factors that may contribute to instrumental motivation for weapon violence against teachers. Our analyses of the 32 “other instrumental” cases revealed four major contributing conditions: 1) behavioral and emotional regulation issues ( $n=10$ ); 2) family or parenting factors ( $n=9$ ); 3) lack of administrative support in discipline ( $n=8$ ); and 4) history of intentional violence ( $n=6$ ).

### *Behavioral and Emotional Regulation Issues*

Nearly a third of the teachers in this sample indicated that an aggressor’s issues with behavioral and emotional regulation contributed to their use of instrumental weapon violence. Behavioral and emotional regulation issues in this study were defined as a perpetrator’s inability to sufficiently regulate their behavior and/or their emotions. This includes issues related to coping strategies, communication, self-control, anger management, authority, following rules, self-esteem, or social skills.



Of these incidents, more than half of the cases in this subset involved teachers intervening in a dispute between students. These participants were placed in a moment of direct danger when they were required to engage in immediate intervention. One teacher describes a moment in which a student intentionally utilizes a book bag with wheels, pulling “it back like a bat”, to cause harm to others.

The most frightening thing that happened is as I was entering the building, a student was pulling a bookbag with wheels and lifted it, pulled it back like a bat, and aimed at another student. I stopped him verbally, and he lowered the case to the floor again, but he repeated it two more times as we were walking into the building...I was frightened that he would hit either me or the other students ...There was little I could have done ...without actually escalating the situation with this particular child. The less you [engage] with him, the better ...

Another teacher was able to prevent an incident of gun violence by intervening as soon as they saw a weapon present,

This student was picked on by other students despite my efforts to stop the bullies. The child decided to shoot the main bully. I happened to see him pull the gun out of a bag and then I grabbed it from him. I grabbed the gun and he chased me. I was lucky to reach the office as I ran out of the classroom to protect the other students.

In contrast to participants who shared instances where intervening in student aggression caused them harm, one teacher shared an experience where a lack of intervention was perceived as a contributing condition that resulted in school-wide assault planned and executed by three students. This particular participant reported that

...students got ahold of a handsaw and turned some other objects into weapons

as well and attacked teachers, aides, office staff and administrators, tried to break down doors that were locked, broke a window etc. Because staff were attempting to refrain from using any form of physical restraint, things got out of hand, the students took over the building and staff were injured.

#### *Family or Parenting Factors*

Another prevalent contributing factor among teacher responses is the influence of family and parenting factors. Participant data indicates that parental treatment of a child or unstable home conditions can potentially carry over into the school environment in the form of weapon-related aggression. Teacher victimization can result from student and parent attitudes toward teachers. Three emergent themes arose from this secondary code: 1) unstable home environment 2) parent is supportive of violent behavior, and 3) parent perpetration of violence based upon instrumental motivation.

Participants who shared instances where they attributed their experience to an unstable home environment discussed issues around abuse, divorce, and general instability that carried over into the school environment. For example, in an incident in which a student “brought knives to school to slice [their] throat”, the teacher indicated the student’s “unstable home environment” as the reason the incident happened. Another teacher had a student’s parents “beat him due to a ‘C’”. Subsequently, the student “brought [a] gun planning to shoot me according to his peers”. In another case, a teacher indicated that “the student’s parents were divorced and constantly manipulated each other through the children” and marked the modelled manipulation as the reason the student would throw objects in class in order to “get what they wanted or to get out of what they didn’t want.”

In addition to unstable home environments, some teachers in this sample also reported experiences where parents encouraged their children’s behavior either directly or indirectly. One teacher indicated that despite a history of intentionally harmful behavior, “mom supports him in his

behaviors”. Similarly, a different teacher shared that a sixth grade student “deliberately placed [a] large shard of glass under my car tires.” resulting in a blown out tire on the highway. The same student’s mother “gave him permission to” intentionally disrespect the teacher in “class on a weekly basis”. These incidents reflect situations where students were encouraged by their families to engage in aggressive behavior, resulting in teachers experiencing extreme acts of aggression planned out and perpetrated by their students.

While most teachers in this sample experienced victimization by students, other participants were subject to weapon threats and aggression, perpetrated by parents of students as a means of subverting custodial agreements. One teacher had “a non-custodial parent [point] a gun at me” in order to “abduct his daughter.” Another teacher experienced “a noncustodial parent show up at the back of my pod... [hollering] and apparently possessing a gun, looking for his child and threatening anyone who got in his way”.

#### *Lack of Administrative Support in Discipline*

Teachers in the sample who experienced instrumentally motivated aggression indicated that lack of administrative support or discipline precipitated a violent incident. Teachers in this subset shared instances where administrators were aware of their aggressors’ troubling behaviors; however, they opted not to implement any sort of preventative measures, resulting in an avoidable violent incident. For example, one teacher had a student who “drew pictures of killing me and other students and then [the student] brought a gun (starter pistol) to follow through”. The teacher indicated that they “had shown the drawing to the [administration] before he brought the weapon and they told me that it wasn’t a threat”.

In a separate incident, a teacher recounts having their books knocked out of their hands after interrupting two non-students threatening a student with a pipe:

I was walking to my car in the staff parking lot and witnessed a non-student threatening one of our high school

students with a pipe. The non-student, who was about 19 years of age, had one friend with him. I told both of them that they needed to leave our student alone and leave our school grounds or they would be charged with assault and criminal trespassing. It was at that point that they turned their bad attentions towards me... I felt lucky to have only my books knocked out of my hands...

The teacher further noted that though the assailants were arrested by campus monitors before the violence escalated any further, the non-students had been identified earlier in the day looking for their student victim, but no one had notified the police.

In addition to instances involving traditional weapons, teachers in this subset who felt administration played a role in their assault also experienced instances where ordinary objects were weaponized against them. One participant was intentionally targeted for their known deadly allergy to perfume in which a “student drenched themselves in perfume” prior to entering the teacher’s presence. This teacher noted that the administration knew of the student’s history of behavior, but they “would take no action to [the] student, so he got bolder”. Another teacher, while attempting to keep another student from entering the class, had a door slammed on their hand. The teacher noted that the student had tried “holding the door open in [my] class many times before this” and that she had informed the administration about it, but they “did not think it was serious enough to warrant suspension”.

#### *History of Intentional Violence*

Arguably most disturbingly, teachers in this subset also shared incidents where their aggressor had a known inclination towards violence or history of intentional violence. In these cases, teachers indicated that they had an awareness of previous, intentionally violent behavior or patterns on behalf of the aggressor. These incidents reflect premeditated situations where teachers were victimized and/or threatened by individuals who enjoyed weapons, violence, and inflicting harm against others.

For example, some teachers note the aggressor's sense of enjoyment in causing harm or possessing weapons. In the incident in which the student utilized a backpack to attack another student, the teacher indicated, that "they have heard him verbally plan to hurt people, have been threatened by him, and seen him intentionally carry out plans" and that the student "[delights] in frightening people" prior to the incident. The teacher also noted the student's educational placement did not meet his needs. A separate teacher confiscated a "double edged blade" knife from one of their students, noting that the student "had a love of knives and guns" and liked to "subtly threaten others because they know that he likes to 'stick' people with sharpen pen caps...".

Some incidences in which the aggressor had a history of intentional violence were potentially enacted as a means of playing a cruel joke on whomever may encounter the scene of violence. For example, a teacher noted escalating patterns of violence directed towards them by a group of male students who would "come to my house, ring the doorbell, holler [obscenities] and light firecrackers under my vehicle." This ultimately resulted in an incredibly disturbing and threatening incident where the assailants "took my candy cane decorations out of my yard, stabbed them through cats and returned the candy canes containing the cats to my porch" when the teacher was out of town. In a separate case, a teacher unknowingly "entered a disabled elevator where Police Grade Mace had been sprayed" resulting in respiratory distress and long-term lung damage. The student who had sprayed the mace "thought it would be funny" and had previously been convicted for an act of assault.

Additional cases noted the use or manipulation of everyday objects to enact violence. In one case, a teacher reported having a 3-year-old student, whom they had known as "very violent", "pull a pair of adult scissors on me and tell me that she was going to stab me in the neck because she wanted to drink my blood". The teacher also noted the student was "awaiting placement in a program for the severely [emotionally disturbed]." In another case, a student plotted to kill their teacher with a pencil sharpener blade and was known to be "prone to violence" as it was

"all he talked about". When describing the incident, the teacher noted the way in which the student planned out the violence:

a student convinced other students to follow him in a plot to kill me. He had a pencil [sharpener] and broke it and took the razor and was waiting until I came back from lunch to kill me. One of the other students told an adult and when I entered my class there was intervention personnel, the police officer and other adults that came to investigate and help if needed.

The teacher indicated this student had also, on a separate occasion, planned a riot in order to intentionally target another student for violence indicating a pattern of intentional violence.

In sum, four major contributing conditions were identified as leading up to these instrumentally motivated weapons incidents directed toward teachers. Victims reported both internal aggressor factors (e.g., behavior and emotion regulation issues and history of intentional violence) as well as external issues outside of both the victims' and aggressors' control (e.g., family or parenting factors and lack of administrative support in discipline).

## DISCUSSION

School violence can yield catastrophic results including mass school shootings. To further understand driving forces that lead to instrumental and expressive motivation to commit violence, this study examined teacher-reported contributing conditions of weapon violence in their most upsetting experiences in the profession. The results of this study indicate that violence towards teachers is the result of a complex web of environmental and individual factors.

In this sample, teacher descriptions of violence revealed four main contributing factors: perpetrator issues around behavioral and emotional regulation, family or parenting factors, discipline policy, and aggressor history of intentional violence.

Teachers shared incidents where perpetrators of weapons violence who struggled with behavior and emotion regulation issues often were involved in a dispute. This indicates that while not everyone who has trouble self-regulating engages in this behavior, self-regulation issues can contribute to instrumental motivation to address problems through enacting weapons violence toward teachers. This may be partially due to challenges linked to low executive functioning. Holley and colleagues (2017) found a positive relationship between executive functioning and emotional regulation skills when concerning an individual's vulnerability to engaging in violent behaviors among undergraduate students. These findings indicate that interventions in both domains may be useful in reducing an individual's likelihood to commit acts of violence, but more research is needed to understand how these findings translate to developing youth. These results further add to extant literature, because thus far, teacher-directed violence research has not examined the ways in which premeditated weapon aggression is carried out or the ways in which perpetrators of premeditated weapon aggression are perceived by their victims. Teachers in this sample felt that student behavior and emotion regulation issues were key contributing factors in their most upsetting experiences with violence.

Teachers also indicated a connection between instrumentally motivated aggression and students who were struggling with complex family and home environments. Teachers were also victimized by parents who sponsored or enacted the violence themselves. These findings support May and colleagues (2010) study among 6,000 Kentucky teachers that suggest a minority of teacher victimizations are enacted by parent perpetrators engaging primarily in verbal threats sparked by teacher discipline of a student. An unstable home environment, a parent being supportive of violent behavior, and parent perpetration of instrumental violence were identified as subthemes among teachers who experienced instances of instrumental violence. These findings indicate the importance of engaging parents and the home environment when attempting to reduce the likelihood of instrumental violence. While there is little

research studying the direct impact of parents of student perpetration of instrumental violence, research has shown parent inclusion can enhance the efficacy of a cognitive-behavioral intervention among aggression-prone 5th and 6th grade students. Lochman and Wells (2003), in a year-long longitudinal study, provided intervention services for students concerning anger management and social problem-solving skills while also providing parenting and stress-management skill interventions for their parents. The researchers found their intervention instilled preventive effects on delinquent behavior and substance use for older and moderate-risk students (Lochman & Wells, 2003).

Teachers also reported a lack of administrative support during previous disciplinary incidents as a contributing condition to their victimization. The lack of preventative intervention resulted in the aggressor being able to continue a pattern of violence with little consequence. These findings further build upon previous research that indicate that administrative support has the power to increase or reduce the impact of violence teachers encounter (McMahon et. al., 2017). Additional evidence suggests an authoritative model of school discipline paired with a positive school climate can significantly decrease reported incidents of peer-to-peer bullying when compared to increased security measures which did not significantly influence rates of bullying. In light of the positive relationship between bullying and weapon carrying (Esselmont 2014), attention to models of school discipline may lower instances of weapon carrying and subsequently levels of weapon-based teacher victimization.

Lastly, teachers reported experiencing instrumental violence from aggressors with a history of intentional violence. These included disturbing incidents of cruel "jokes", noted enjoyment in harming others or possessing weapons, and the methodical use of everyday objects to threaten or enact harm. In each case, the teacher noted a pattern of intentional violence with a variety of explanations. A few teachers noted improper educational placement as an additive factor to the presence of violence. Though there is very little research concerning

the impact of history of intentional violence on teacher victimization, there are routes in which schools can help intervene in these patterns. Cornell and colleagues (2018) examined the implementation of threat assessment practices within 1,865 threat cases reported across Virginia, USA. They found that alongside characteristics such as special education status, battery involvement, and homicide, weapon possession and targeting an administrator were significantly associated with serious threat determination (Cornell et. al, 2018). These findings support threat assessment as a potential intervention tool in interrupting patterns of intentional violence at the threat level before they escalate into a planned incident.

#### Limitations and Strengths

While this study provides a wealth of information around factors that contribute to instrumental weapon violence in schools, it is also not without its limitations. This study is composed entirely of data that was self-reported, and reflective of past experiences. Thus, self-report and retrospective biases must be acknowledged. Also, this study uses data around victims' perceptions of why aggressors engage in weapon violence; however, it does not also utilize the aggressor perspective or reasons for their behavior, which would

enhance the study. Also, due to the small sample size and the specific focus of the study, one should be careful around making generalizations regarding these findings. However, given the dearth of research in this area, this study provides novel insights to be considered in future research around teacher-directed weapon violence, contributing conditions, and instrumental motivation.

#### Conclusion

Teacher victimization can appear in various forms, including acts of verbal, physical, and emotional harm. Weapons violence is a serious issue that needs to be addressed. This study identified four major themes, including behavioral and emotional regulation issues, parent and family factors, lack of administrative support in discipline, and a history of intentional violence as contributing conditions to instrumental motivation to engage in weapons behavior against teachers. We identified several implications for research and practice. There is a need to further investigate the complex array of contributing factors and motivations related to weapons violence across various school stakeholders, including educators, as well as work toward effective prevention and intervention of these behaviors.

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