

# School Violence: The Bidirectional Conflict Flow Between Neighborhood and School

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In this article we explore the interrelationship between school and neighborhood violence through an ethnographic study conducted over a two-year period in a New York City middle school. This article presents a bidirectional flow of adolescent conflict by analyzing incidents taking place outside the school that originate in the school setting, and incidents of conflict occurring in the school that were initiated in the surrounding neighborhood. The research shows the effect of school and neighborhood structures on adolescent violence, concluding that school violence is a highly contextual and dynamic process. Adolescents do not choose their fights in a vacuum, but instead, in their selection of peers, allies, and conflict groups, they mirror the organizational and cultural settings of both their school and neighborhood.

## INTRODUCTION

In order to stay safe you should be with people from your block. Don't be alone on the street. —Saida, age 13

The issue of school violence has been a theme of great importance on the national agenda and a source of anxiety for many parents in recent years. Research points to the high, though not increasing, rates of school violence nationwide (Anderson, 1998; Bastian and Taylor, 1991; Gottfredson and Gottfredson, 1985; Maguire and Pastore, 1996; National Institute of Education, 1978; Nolin, Davies, and Chandler, 1995). Media representation of school violence, such as the national coverage of the Columbine shootings and local coverage of the recent New York City school shooting at Manhattan's Martin Luther King, Jr. High School in January 2002, provides sufficient material to feed popular fears (Baker, 2002; Ogle, Eckman and Leslie, 2003). Studies also indicate an increase in the severity of the incidents taking place on school grounds, due in part to the use of guns to solve disputes (National School Boards Association, 1993; O'Keefe, 1997) and the larger number of students who carry guns (Sheley, McGee, and Wright, 1995; Simon, Crosby, and Dahlberg, 1999). Fear of violence in the schools has a more direct effect on the students than on

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their parents. Even where rates of school violence are lower, students exhibit considerable fear and anxiety about their vulnerability to violence (Duncan, 1996). Efforts by schools and legislatures to control violence by targeting gangs in the schools has had the side effect of heightening the presence of gang-related activity, further supporting the students' perceptions that they need a gang affiliation for their own safety (Thomkins, 2000). The most recent national report, *Indicators of School Crime and Safety 1998*, published by the National Center for Education Statistics in conjunction with the Bureau of Justice Statistics, finds that, compared with the 1989 data, students increasingly feel in jeopardy both in school and while traveling to and from school (National Center for Education Statistics, 1998, p. 30). The report summary concludes: "Students are exposed and vulnerable to crime away from as well as at school. In fact, life away from school may be more dangerous for some students than life at school" (National Center for Education Statistics, 1998, p. 2).

The social meaning of the boundary between school and neighborhood is further evidenced by coverage of the recent shooting incident alluded to above. Although there were several cases of student violence involving guns in front of public schools reported in New York in recent years, the 2002 event was reported as "the first [shooting] in a city school in nearly eight years" (Baker, 2002). Implicit in these statements is a distinction between threats and incidents that occur in school and those that do not. This distinction, however, may be artificially magnified. To begin with, this division overlooks the role of the school in the community, and the permeability of the perimeter between school and street. Student life is both physically and temporally organized around the school, with tangible structures of control present only within the borders of the school. After 3 PM, just outside the school, the safety net is removed, but conflict among students remains. Schools that reduce violence within their walls, ignoring what happens outside, might be, to some extent, merely relocating it just outside the boundary.

The present study is about this boundary. Through the analysis of ethnographic data collected over a two-year period in a New York inner-city neighborhood, a bidirectional flow of violence between school and community is discerned and explained. We argue that many incidents taking place outside the school originate in school, while many incidents occurring in the school originate in the neighborhood and are not school related. We view the school as but one formally organized element of the larger social context defined by the neighborhood. Students inscribe social relations from the neighborhood onto school interactions, even as the school restructures relations among students in ways that play out on the streets.

#### VIOLENCE IN THE SCHOOLS

High levels of violence in schools are associated with neighborhood violence, but the causal mechanisms remain underspecified. Social disorganization theory, for example, has been used to explain neighborhood violence as a byproduct of neighborhood instability caused by structural factors: low socioeconomic status (Reiss and Roth, 1993), ethnic heterogeneity and high residential mobility (Shaw and McKay, 1942; Sampson and Lauritsen, 1994), and urbanization and anonymity (Sampson and Groves, 1989). In an unstable neighborhood, the community has weak social control over its members, which is hypothesized to lead to a higher degree of violence. This perspective would indicate that schools do

not generate violence as much as they reflect locations where violence permeates. Conflict spawned outside the institution is enacted within its walls (Gottfredson and Gottfredson, 1985; Pearson and Toby, 1991; Sheley, McGee, and Wright, 1995). In an oversimplified fashion, social disorganization theory can also be read to imply that violence in the schools is caused by “bad” kids, and explained by the fact that the schools are located in bad neighborhoods.

Social disorganization theory, of course, has little to say about violence in “organized” neighborhoods, including rural and suburban areas. Despite the popular assumption that urban school violence is “normal” in ways that rural school violence is not (Menifield et al., 2001), rural students often face difficulties comparable to those in urban communities. Studies of adolescent violence in both rural and urban settings have consistently pointed out the role of peer-group social standing—reputation—in precedence of violent events (Anderson, 1999; Horowitz, 1983; Sullivan, 2002; Wilkenson, 2001). Yet, it is difficult to compare violent events among the different settings; even the notion of the “neighborhood” fits less well into the spatial organization of communities outside of cities. In dense urban areas such as New York City, understanding of the neighborhood is essential to any study of the school and its surrounding community. The school violence literature describes violence in schools as variously dependent on the school environment as well as neighborhood characteristics (Anderson, 1998; Gottfredson and Gottfredson, 1985; Hellman and Beaton, 1986; Ringwalt et al., 1992; Sheley, McGee, and Wright, 1995). School structural characteristics predictive of disorder included size (large school), staffing (high student/teacher ratio), and lack of resources (Welsh, Greene, and Jenkins, 1999). Schools with the worst disciplinary problems were those with ambiguous rules or inconsistently enforced rules and inactive administrations (Gottfredson, 1989). In contrast to the social disorganization approach, Hellman and Beaton (1986) indicate that school characteristics are the overriding factor in predicting school violence, especially for middle schools. Anderson (1998) indicates that proactive preventive measures taken by school staff can ameliorate students’ victimization from violence.

Clearly, institutional and environmental factors are interdependent. The literature hints at the existence of a bidirectional flow of violence between schools and neighborhoods, but as Welsh, Greene, and Jenkins (1999, p. 82) indicate, the connection between violence in schools and the surrounding community “is rarely articulated or explored.” This article explores some of the social processes that link school and community conflict and violence, in an urban context. Rather than merely count and locate numbers of violent events, we seek to use the personal accounts of the participants to contextualize conflicts, and to trace their development into acts of violence. This approach has been found to be particularly well suited for the analysis of incidents of school violence. “Since individuals are nested within schools that are in turn nested within communities, it is therefore important to inquire how these three levels interact to generate or prevent violence and whether the processes involved are similar or different for different forms of violence” (Sullivan, 2002, p. 257).

We use the concept of *conflict* to help clarify the complex relationship between violence in schools and violence in neighborhoods. Conflict involves a difference in goals and interests between two or more people. Two aspects of conflict are emphasized: (1) it is a state of unresolved tension due to opposition; and (2) it is a malleable state that has not necessarily reached full-blown (physical) violence. A corollary of this definition is that violence is not an inevitable outcome of conflict. Peaceful resolution is another possible outcome.

Avoidance, evasion, or confrontation between parties are all plausible. This definition allows us to examine how both neighborhood and school characteristics mediate between conflict and violence. School and neighborhood social contexts often define the goals and interests of the individuals as well as the means by which they are resolved. In other words, in those neighborhoods where conflict is often solved through physical confrontation, violence is a more probable outcome. In the same fashion, in those schools where there is a weaker control over students' behavior, the violent outcome is more likely to be found. Simply knowing that environment is associated with particular outcomes does not explain anything about the nature or causes of conflict. Nor does it suggest any means by which students might be induced to resolve their conflicts without recourse to violence. For that, it is necessary to understand the flow of conflict across environments.

### THE STUDY

The data presented in this article were collected as part of a larger longitudinal and ethnographic study of adolescent violence sponsored by the Vera Institute of Justice. As part of this study, the primary author began participant observation in a junior high school in a predominantly immigrant neighborhood of New York City. For three years, we tracked and documented the social context of conflict development for 25 students from seventh grade through the completion of their first year of high school. The sample was stratified for a comparable number of boys and girls, with a wide distribution of academic standings. Table 1 lists some of the sample's characteristics. There were 15 boys and 10 girls, most of Dominican descent. Some of them were considered immigrants (less than three years in the United States), others were children of immigrant families. Fourteen students were second generation, born in the United States with immigrant parents, and 11 were born outside the United States in the Dominican Republic. At the time of the research, at least

**TABLE 1.** Sample Characteristics

<i>Gender</i>	
Boys	15
Girls	10
<i>Ethnicity</i>	
Dominican	21
Cuban	1
Puerto Rican	3
<i>Average number of siblings at home</i>	1.5
<i>Average number of siblings</i>	2.4
<i>Average residential changes during time of research</i>	1.1
<i>Immigration</i>	
First generation	11
Second generation	14
<i>Employment</i>	
Households with at least one family member with regular employment	17
Households without family members with regular employment	8
<i>Benefits</i>	
Households receiving public benefits	11
Household not receiving public benefits	14

25 percent of the total student body was recent immigrants, and one-third (31 percent) of the students attended bilingual education classes.

The primary author spent many hours observing the entire school and noted conflict situations and violent incidents among the rest of the student population, in the school and in the neighborhood. In many cases, some of our sample of 25 students were directly involved in the events. In other cases, they served as our expert informants, narrating the conflicts, if not actually interpreting their histories and meanings. To ensure that there were a significant number of students considered “troublemakers”—students with a history of conflict—we oversampled students assigned to special programs designed for those who were often in trouble academically and/or due to their behavior. In addition, each of the students and their parents were interviewed at least once annually for the duration of the study. The majority of the data, however, comes from participant observation of the focal teens interacting in their school and neighborhood. This methodology gives a voice to the subjects of investigation and provides a fuller understanding of how and where conflict originated and where it peaked.

The findings presented here rely mainly on the field observations and interviews done during the two first years of fieldwork while the students were enrolled in seventh and eighth grade. All field notes and interviews were summarized and analyzed with the aid of qualitative data analysis software. For this study a total of 2,730 summaries of Wave 1 and 2 of interviews and 593 summaries of field notes were used.

All conflicts were labeled with one or more codes in order to contextualize the events. Conflicts were first identified according to the social space in which they originated, if such a determination were possible, and the location in which they led to violence, if that occurred. Four codes were used: school-neighborhood; neighborhood-school; school-school; neighborhood-neighborhood. Conflicts were further defined according to the nature of the proximate trigger issue or event. Many of the events were situationally dependent and specific to one setting. Sports-related conflict, for example, is both structured by and enacted within the school. Others were clearly ongoing conflicts that cross over the boundaries between neighborhood and school. Block gang conflict, for example, originates with the structure of block gangs outside the schools, but can lead to violence in any setting. A summary with brief definitions of the conflict codes is provided in the Appendix. A total of 195 incidents were examined.

#### SOCIAL ORGANIZATION OF CONFLICT IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD AND THE SCHOOL

##### The Neighborhood: El Dorado

Students describe the neighborhood in terms that suggest the constant presence of danger, as though it were an untamed frontier town in a Western movie. References to gangs and vendettas were common, while invocations of police protection or other forms of “legitimate” authority were rare. Yet, an informant also indicated that the police consider this school “a virgin,” since there have not been any stabbings or shootings. The two principal lines of conflict identified by our informants were by immigration status and by block. El Dorado, the code name for the neighborhood in which the students live, is located in an immigrant quarter in New York City. Historically, this neighborhood has been one of the first stops in the United States for many immigrants. The net surplus of new immigrants, the majority of them from the Dominican Republic, has transformed

the physiognomy of the neighborhood: A great number of Dominican restaurants dot the area, Spanish is the language spoken in the local stores, and Dominican music (Merengue and Bachata) can be heard from loudspeakers outside of the many bodegas that supply the neighborhood.

The neighborhood is not without visible social problems, including an active drug trade. All the students are aware that there are many drug sellers in their neighborhood. They often refer to drug dealers as “tigres” (tigers) who can always be found “on the corners” of El Dorado’s blocks. A common word of advice from parents to their children is to avoid the people on the corners and to go the other way if they spot trouble. Other residents, however, see drugs as something that only affects those involved in the buying and selling. Mario, one long-time neighborhood resident, summarized the place of drug crime in the neighborhood as he experiences it. “They don’t waste their time stealing. Here one can wear a gold chain and they don’t take it from you. They are paying attention to their business. Their business gives them more benefits. The shooting and [drug] wars go on between them.” Although the neighborhood has had the highest homicide rate in New York City, in all other crime categories El Dorado falls below average (Garfield and Abramson, 1994).

Another consequence of the heavy drug trade is the social division of the neighborhood into blocks. The drug business generates division among blocks, which drug dealers define and defend as their “turf” or sales area. In the neighborhood, groups of youth have “hang out areas” that tend to overlap with the turf areas of the highly developed drug markets. These groupings may be compared with gangs because they are named, ritualized groups that are spatially defined and often have conflict with one another. The block gangs are not directly employed by drug traffickers, but rather serve as an overlapping source of potential violence in this area. These block gangs pose a significant risk factor for all the residents in the area, particularly the adolescents.

The division of local space into pseudo-gang groupings often forces the children to define their loyalties by street block. Many students identify themselves as “belonging” to a block. They “represent” the block, usually where their home is located. Arelis described representing as an automatic obligation to residence. “If you live on a block you have to represent it. You go to your block and you say, I got beef, and they come [and help you]. That means represent you.” Representing provides a strong sense of security that if a conflict occurs, students are confident they will have “backup,” or people to “watch their backs” and who are referred to as “peeps” or “my peoples.”

For Saida and many other students, people from their block are considered a safety net and resource in a conflict or potentially violent situation; being unable to rely on backup is perceived as a vulnerability.

When you have a beef with another girl, or another boy, right. They gang your block up. Like where they live they go with backup, it’s called backup. Where you have backup and you letting them know you don’t have backup, they jump you. And if you don’t have any backup you can’t do anything about it.

Being perceived as having “peeps” is a safety factor for the adolescents as they manage their “beefs.”

Teresa pointed to a further implication of the rigid social frontiers between blocks. People from other blocks become a safety threat, a potential source of trouble. Throughout this interview, Teresa described her neighborhood as calm and peaceful. But she also stated

that she worries about her safety whenever she leaves her block. "Because there are people that I don't know, and there is people that I know that don't like me. So, it's a problem." If an adolescent from a block has trouble with a person from another block, and has a big group of friends willing to stand up for him or her, the opponent must also bring "his [or her] peoples" in order to keep the fight on equal terms. This need for backup has become part of the students' lives. When Saida was in the seventh grade, she always arranged to go home with somebody else, but not out of friendship. "So you get backup, just in case somebody jumps you, you have somebody to back you up."

The ongoing rivalry in the neighborhood imbues most students, especially in those more involved with "block life," with a sense that no place is safe. The belief that one needs to be constantly on guard determined a variety of behaviors in the school. One student, who was deeply involved in block gangs, explained that he walks against the wall so if a group of people want to jump him, "he would have his back covered."

The division of the neighborhood into block groups, and the social rules that operate within the neighborhood and across blocks, influences the daily lives of all students. Many students define their friends and enemies as a function of the block to which they belong. Such strong identification with a block carries extreme loyalties. One can hardly imagine a better way to document the existence of unwritten rules than through Ali's conscious transgression and breaking of them as he talks about his good friend Ario.

Ali: Oh, we not suppose to be friends, me and Ario.

Int.: No? Why not?

Ali: Because we are from different blocks.

#### The School: La Escuelita

La Escuelita, the code name for the junior high school where the study sample attended the seventh and eighth grades, opened its doors in 1992 in a brand new building. The five-floor building is located next to a park. It is spacious and full of light, giving it a warm and welcoming appearance. La Escuelita had an enrollment of 1,450 students during the study period.

La Escuelita is run in partnership between a not-for-profit organization that we will call KAS and the New York City Board of Education. The philosophy behind this partnership is to build a community school where the students can receive both an education and any other services that they require. A KAS brochure explains their concept of a community school as one that "turns public schools into full-service community centers that are open all day, all week, year-round, with on-site health counseling, child care, extended-day programs, tutoring, adult education, parent workshops, cultural programs and summer camp." The school, therefore, is organized around the assumption that the boundary between school and neighborhood is, and should be, permeable. We may call this the KAS model, though it is not unique to this one school. The administration also invests heavily in the kinds of support mechanisms that social disorganization theory would associate with high social control and a low conflict institution. The school is divided into five academies, each emphasizing a theme of study and located on different floors: expressive arts, communications and technology, ethics and law, community service, and business studies. The students are divided into grades within the academies and attend either the monolingual or bilingual program. The bilingual program has classes in Spanish as well as in English as a Second Language (ESL). There is no tracking in the school. The majority of the students

in the school are of Latino origin, reflecting the large influx of Dominican immigrants into the neighborhood in recent years.

The division of bilingual and monolingual classes at La Escuelita often leads to tension that can be a source of conflict between students. The monolingual students (who primarily speak Spanish), often recent arrivals from the Dominican Republic, are pejoratively labeled “hicks.” Hick refers to youths who are not well versed in the ways of the city (e.g., are still learning English, or “don’t know how to dress”). The division reflects ongoing tensions between recent and second-generation immigrants that transcend the school environment, but is also a tangible part of the social structure of students’ day-to-day lives. As one student explained in reference to her conflict with another girl: “Yes they call us hicks, but we are better than them. We are bilingual. We speak two languages.” Conflict between the bilingual and monolingual students occasionally flares into fights.

The school’s structure of five academies is also a source of conflict and fights in La Escuelita. Students go from one floor to other floors looking for trouble. On one occasion, a student from the fourth floor looked the “wrong way” at a student from the fifth floor, precipitating a sequence of violent events. Later, fifth-floor students surrounded and threatened the fourth-floor student in the bathroom. The fourth-floor student resorted to backup from his block. Some high school students from his block waited for the fifth-floor students outside the school. One of the latter was severely beaten by a group of 20 youngsters.

Students describe the divisions between floors and classes in terms similar to those applied to block gangs. In one incident, in which a couple of students had tried to take another student’s jacket, the intended victim, Alberto, described his assailants as “two kids from the third floor.” Mara explained that while she usually prefers to let her friends settle their own fights, it’s not always practical. When the other students bring support from their classes, she has an obligation to get involved. “Because there are classes that if you mess with one, you mess with all of them.”

#### CONFLICT FLOW

As presented in Table 2, 39 percent of the recorded incidents have a delayed outcome. That is, the outcome of the conflict took place later in time and in a place other than where it originated: 18 percent of incidents were initiated in school and played out in the neighborhood and 21 percent of incidents played out in the school were initiated in the neighborhood. These numbers point to an interrelation between school and neighborhood violence. This interrelation is further supported by the data summarized in Table 3, which presents the reported reasons behind the incidents. The most prevalent reason behind school conflict is block gangs (17 percent of all coded incidents).

**TABLE 2.** Where Conflict Originates/Occurs

Initiated/Occurred	# of Incidents	% of Total
School-neighborhood	35	18%
Neighborhood-school	41	21%
School-school	94	48%
Neighborhood-neighborhood	25	13%
Total	195	100%

**TABLE 3.** Reasons for Conflict

Reason for Incident	# of Incidents*	Column Percent
Block gang	45	17%
Name calling	31	12%
Play fight	20	8%
Stealing	17	7%
Weapon	18	7%
Jump	16	6%
Floors/class	16	6%
Adult	16	6%
Staged fight	14	5%
Bullying	11	4%
About boys/girls	10	4%
Dislike	10	4%
Labeled hick	9	3%
Threat	6	2%
Sexual	6	2%
Clothing	4	2%
Defending friend(s)	4	2%
Sports	4	2%
Drugs	3	1%
Total	260	100%

\*There are a total of 195 incidents recorded. Some were coded with more than one category.

### Conflict from Neighborhood to School

Belonging to a “block gang” is used by the students as a source of pride and, at times, as a threat to their fellow students. Luis refers convincingly to the deterrent aspect of this support system: “They know not to mess with me, because if they do . . . , my peeps.” From the students’ perspective, “representing” carries the benefit of enabling them to safely navigate the school as well as the streets, since it serves as a deterrent to being picked on or victimized by other students. These geographical and social distinctions have real consequences for the mobility of the teens in their immediate surroundings.

Despite the fact that the students perceive representing as a safety resource, the strong identification with one’s block may often be a source of conflict that affects the students’ lives in school, as well as their ability to enter and leave the school. When two blocks “have beef,” the teen residents who belong to each one of the block gangs automatically have “beef” with one another. On one occasion, leaving school after an interview, a student, Ali, explained that he didn’t want to walk down Redwood Street because “Redwood had beef with [his] block.” Rico reported similar problems and his need to avoid the Graytown area (public housing) because there was an ongoing conflict between Graytown and Cost, Rico’s block.

Students follow the development of the conflicts closely, since not knowing about “block beefs” can increase the likelihood of becoming a target. The presence of ongoing, potentially violent conflicts among students within the school means that other students must demonstrate an awareness both of school norms, in order to succeed in class, and the “street ethos,” in order to negotiate conflict situations (Mateu-Gelabert, 1998). Even those who have no affiliation with block gangs are in constant danger of becoming enmeshed in the pattern of street-based conflict situations.

Conflicts between block groups can have long histories. Often, the kids most aware of what is happening on the streets can narrate the tales leading up to the latest beef.

Sofia: Cost [Street] has a lot of problems with Redwood [Street]. 'Cause Redwood likes to disrespect a lot. Redwood doesn't, they jump, alright, Cost, Redwood, Redwood jumped a guy from Cost. The guy told Cost. Cost got pissed. Now Cost said Redwood and I are enemies. Cost and Clermont [Street] I think they made up, they're friends now. They made a friendship.

Int.: And who decides this, I mean who...?

Sofia: They do, the whole group.

Int.: The whole group.

Sofia: The whole block. If one goes down it's all of them.

Fifty-one percent of incidents initiated in the neighborhood and carried on into the school were related to block gangs. Although kids can avoid particular blocks in the neighborhood, they all attend the same school, sit in the same classrooms, and eat in the same cafeteria. Students continue to "represent" their block, but often encounter students of opposing blocks while in school. If an encounter between opposing block members occurs while in the school, the individuals may decide to fight as a way to "get justice" for ongoing grievances. One of the most dramatic examples of this happened during the first year of field observations. Zorba, a student attending the after-school teen program, was confronted by some of the Redwood boys on his way to the gym. One of the Redwood boys approached Zorba, saying: "I heard you have a beef with my block." Zorba tried to run but he was tripped by one of them. Once on the floor, five or six Redwood boys started hitting and kicking him. His face was badly hurt and he was sent to the emergency room.

Block gang loyalties in the neighborhood also create obligations that influence conflict in school. A student, Jerome, once found a bicycle frame on Redwood Street and took it. Some students from Redwood caught up with Jerome at school and demanded money as restitution for taking the frame from their block. Jerome, worried about his safety, alerted a school safety officer, who confronted one of Redwood boys. The boy explained that he was "just doing a favor for a kid on his block."

The majority of the students manage to navigate this world of block gangs; however, many had difficulty avoiding it. Jorge was unable to adapt and had many difficulties from the moment he began attending La Escuelita. Jorge's problems became exacerbated in seventh grade when four students jumped him on the stairs. Jorge explained with disdain that Jordi, one of his attackers, had asked him which block he came from before the assault so Jordi would know how many people Jorge could rely on. Jorge confessed his unawareness of block life, block gangs, and street ethos. "I only live on my block," he explained. Jorge was afraid that Jordi would pick a fight with him again.

### Conflict Flow from School to Neighborhood

Students from the same classroom but different blocks occasionally stage play fights. Although these incidents primarily serve to establish standing within the class, the division by block allows any unresolved tension to spill over into the streets. If a contest turns sour, the parties often threaten to bring "their people" from the block to "get" other students. This was the case when Rafael, a student in a seventh-grade bilingual class, had a play fight with Darwin, a fellow classmate. Darwin threatened Rafael, saying that he would bring his

boys from the third floor, many of whom are residents of Redwood. "I'm from Redwood," Darwin yelled outside his classroom, "I'm going to get him. He doesn't know I have my people. I'm going to get him. Watch. Watch." Inside the classroom, Rafael seemed very concerned and stated: "He is saying he is going to bring people at three o'clock. But I got people too. I'm not going to fight alone."

As presented in Table 2, 18 percent of all recorded conflicts originated in the school and occurred in the neighborhood. Within the category of school to neighborhood conflict, the most prevalent codes were block gang (16 percent), staged fight (12 percent), floors/class (11 percent), name calling (11 percent), dislike (11 percent), jump (7 percent), weapon (7 percent), bullying (5 percent), and defending friend (5 percent). The other categories (play fight, labeled hick, sports, stealing, about boys/girls, and threat) carried the remaining 18 percent.

Staged fights present a conflict in which fellow classmates encourage some ongoing animosity among students within a class. A student (referred to as the messenger), aware of the conflict and wishing to witness the fight, goes back and forth among both contenders and the audience (members of the same class or a clique of friends) arranging the time and place of the fight. Different classes or cliques may back one or the other of the students. The staged fight provides an opportunity for groups to announce a shift in alliances, to publicly endorse or dissociate a fellow student with respect to their group.

We observed one "staged fight" as it moved from the school to the neighborhood. At three o'clock, a large group of students left school together and headed toward the park. Up the hill on the road, at least 60 students were in a circle. Most of the known "troublemakers" were there, including Taffy. At the bottom of the hill two female students prepared to fight. In front of the group, Taffy had given one of the fighters a big plastic ring, to function as a kind of "brass knuckle." During the fight, this student did most of the hitting while the other was backing away, at an obvious disadvantage. After the fight, Taffy approached "her" fighter and took the ring off of the fighter's finger. "You don't need it anymore," Taffy said, "You won."

On another occasion, the animadversion between bilingual and monolingual classes led to a fight in the street between two students. Joanne, a student in the monolingual class, went to Maria's block to look for her. Once she found Maria, Joanne fought her because she had "disrespected" Joanne and her class in the school cafeteria.

The desire to protect weaker members of one's class may also cause conflict to spill over from school into the neighborhood. Veronique, a seventh grader in a monolingual class, followed another student outside the school because she had threatened Catherine, a fellow classmate. "She said that she was going to get people, so I got people," Catherine explained, justifying Veronique's involvement. Veronique was stopped and handcuffed by the police. She was carrying a knife.

Students recognize that there may be repercussions for fighting in school that would not apply outside. In one incident, a fight that had begun in a classroom over choice of seats was delayed until after dismissal at the end of the school day. "I didn't want to fight," Carlos, one of the students told us, "but I told him that if he wanted to fight he should fight right there." The other student didn't want to fight in school, so he told Carlos to meet him at three o'clock. Students understand that the school is more likely to discipline them for fighting on school grounds than the police are to arrest them for fighting outside.

## POLICY IMPLICATIONS

School officials have had to recognize and adjust to the students' social context in order to respond to school violence. La Escuelita's and KAS's staff use many resources in an effort to maintain a safe environment or to curtail the conflict flow between school and neighborhood. The school staff, when aware of conflict, intervene and attempt to guide the students toward nonviolent resolutions. They also devote considerable attention to the spill over of conflict between the school and the neighborhood. The preventive steps taken by the school are aimed at stopping both streams of conflict: from school to neighborhood and from neighborhood to school.

School security officers patrol the school's perimeter as a sort of demilitarized zone. Patrolling the perimeter is intended to keep trouble that may come from the neighborhood away from the students while they are near the school. School staff often approach teens from other schools in order to encourage them to leave the area surrounding La Escuelita. Since school dismissal provides a perfect time and place to locate somebody with whom someone has a beef (before the parties return to the "safety" of their home block), outside persons come during dismissal to confront and "fight out" grievances that had been previously generated in the streets. As a preventive measure, security officers seek out "those looking for trouble," who are asked to leave. In the words of the KAS head of security, "block gangs try to get near the school and we have to push them away." On occasion, when the school staff is aware that a major confrontation of block gangs is about to happen, they request additional safety officers from the district.

When the administration observed too many fights occurring immediately after school, it started to dismiss the academies at different times. This reduced the number of students outside the school at one time but also separated classes that had existing conflicts. In one instance, the school safety officers had heard rumors that the Redwood boys were out to get a student because of a neighborhood fight. As a preventive measure, the guards sent this student home 20 minutes before dismissal. The school tries to limit opportunities for violence by managing the interaction between the institution and its environment.

The competition between floors is recognized by the school administration, which has implemented further changes designed to diminish conflict. In one incident observed during this study, a dispute over the outcome of a football game between two floors became the focal point for an ongoing series of fights and threats. Groups of boys from the second floor ran to the fifth floor, hitting and pushing other students and shouting "second floor rules." Fifth-floor students would inevitably retaliate, leading to outbreaks of violence in gym classes and after school. Eventually, a fight in the manner of a gang rumble was scheduled between the two floors to settle the question of academy supremacy. The fight itself was broken up by the school staff, and administrators, recognizing the origin of the conflict, threatened leaders of both factions with the suspension of all gym classes for both academies if any more fighting took place between them. The violence was averted, or reduced, but competition and conflict remained.

Despite their limitations, a number of the school's strategies appear to have been successful in reducing the number of violent incidents between students and in limiting the severity of injuries when conflicts have exploded into violence. Many after-school fights have been aborted, and conflict has often been dealt with before it could escalate into tragedy. Through the school's attention to the sources of the conflict, and the allocation of resources to address problems as they arise, La Escuelita seeks to provide a safer

environment that is more conducive to learning. Such an outcome is the minimum expected of each school, yet at the same time so difficult to achieve and maintain in an institution with as much conflict as La Escuelita in an environment as fraught with tension as El Dorado.

## CONCLUSION

Throughout this article we have examined numerous examples of the intertwining of school and neighborhood conflict and violence, and how conflict flows between both spaces. This flow of conflict affects the physical safety of the students and the management of the school. Although La Escuelita has developed many strategies to interrupt this flow, its success has been limited. Many fights and some very violent events have taken place in the school and within its perimeter. Yet, we believe, the school's deliberate focus on the bidirectional flow of conflict has enabled it to achieve results not seen in many other city schools.

Previous studies have noted the importance of neighborhood effects on school violence, while others have pointed to the importance of school characteristics. Understanding school violence as a consequence of the bidirectional conflict that flows between a school and its neighborhood allows us to illuminate the process by which neighborhood and school violence are interconnected, and thereby to address conflict at its source rather than its endpoint. This article illuminates this process by (1) documenting the existence of conflict that initiated in the neighborhood and was carried on into the school, and conflict that began on school premises and was carried out in the neighborhood; and (2) documenting how adolescent conflict often mirrors the organizational structures of both school and neighborhood. The coexistence of these structured conflicts accounts for a great amount of adolescent conflict and for a majority of the most severe cases observed in this study.

The bidirectional conflict flow indicates that for adolescent students, school and neighborhood conflict are inseparable. The institutional boundary that we construct between school and community simply does not reflect the lived experiences of the students. Block alliances and conflicts predispose the student to have a significant number of conflicts with the residents of other blocks, even in school, while students from the same floor or the same class tend to define their alliances within these structural divisions. Conflict is also generated along the lines of bilingual and monolingual groupings. Students explicitly define their conflict within these organizational parameters. Conflict can happen anywhere, but it is mediated, and often exacerbated, by the social structures of neighborhood and school.

This study has focused on one New York City middle school, but the results are suggestive for other urban areas. Comparable studies in suburban and rural areas will help to determine whether the findings presented here are particular to neighborhoods with preexisting conflict structures (such as the older drug gangs), or whether different conflict patterns have equal influence within the schools. A better understanding of the interrelationship between community and school would make it easier to identify the needs of students, as well as to help school staff and other interested parties prevent the pernicious effects that some of these preexisting social divisions have on the school environment. It would also help to develop programs to deal with and mitigate those effects.

This research has shown the effect of school and neighborhood structures on student conflict. It has also identified the potential mediating effects of school and community

organization as a source of conflict resolution or avoidance. Future studies that focus on the processes by which this interrelation takes place would help in the design of successful violence prevention programs. Indeed, it is implicit in our findings that violence prevention programs that focus solely on conflict within the school are doomed to fail. Without a deeper understanding of the social context of conflict, we can only seek to catch each incident as it occurs. It is our hope that a more systematic explanation would help us to reduce the potential for violent conflict before it erupts.

The KAS model could inform and assist many schools that struggle with ongoing student conflict, even where levels of school violence appear to be relatively low. First, by recognizing that school conflicts often yield violence elsewhere, schools can gain more accurate measures of the levels of conflict affecting the lives of their students. Second, by attending to the social structure of community conflict, whatever its spatial form, schools can understand, and possibly anticipate, the development of violent confrontations and possibly intervene to redirect the conflict to some other outcome. Finally, if schools are able to identify the kinds of social structures and relations that underlie conflict in their communities, they may be able to provide support for alternative patterns of interaction among students. Officials and security personnel at La Escuelita seek to understand the language of block gangs and to recognize neighborhood figures whose presence would indicate the potential for violence. They intervene to reduce the opportunities for academics to play out their conflicts at the close of the school day. And they use the school facilities to house a variety of nonacademic programs that bring students together in new combinations, while giving them places to go and things to do. In the students' social experience, the school is merely one part of the structure of conflict and support. If we wish to intervene effectively in the flow of conflict, then we must learn to see the school in the same way.

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APPENDIX: CONFLICT CODES

Block gang	Conflict caused by block gangs, gangs, or temporary gangs or conflicts in which the students rely on block gangs as a means to resolve conflict.
Name calling	Conflict in which students insult each other. Examples offered by students included tomboy, pato (gay), bitch, chicken, chicken-head, etc.
Play fight	Conflict in which at least one of the students punched, pushed, and/or kicked.
Stealing	Incident in which money or clothing was taken.
Weapon	Incident in which a box cutter, knife, or gun were present or displayed.
Jump	Conflict in which one student attacked or threatened to attack another with the help of three or more friends.
Floors/class	Conflict in which the students' floor and/or class were referred to as the cause of conflict.
Adult	Conflict between a student and an adult (e.g., student hit teacher or school safety officer).
Staged fight	Conflict that occurred among peers who gather for the purpose of witnessing the fight. The conflict was triggered and/or organized by the mediation of a third party.
Bullying	Conflict in which one of the students is considered a bully.
Dislike	Conflict in which one student expressed personal dislike for the other.
Labeled as hicks	Conflict in which one of the parties was labeled "hick."
About boys/girls	Conflict about seeing or hearing rumors about the contender "stealing boyfriend/girlfriend" or saying "X goes out with/kissed/likes Y."
Threat	Conflict in which one contender threatened the other with physical violence.
Sexual	Conflict sexual in nature.
Clothing	Conflict in which style of dressing is mocked.
Defending friend(s)	Conflict in which one contender is involved because he/she defends friends or relatives.
Sports	Conflict as a result of playing sports.
Drugs	Conflict in which drugs were involved.