

Human Security Chronicle 6 – Peer to Peer Violence in Schools

- *Fight between high-school students in Novi Sad* – Press, 11.03.2013¹
- *Juvenile on trial: I was defending myself from two guys* – Novosti, 29.08.2013²
- *Student stabbed in front of Novi Pazar High School* – Sandzak Info 06.03.2014³
- *Brick in the head: Fight between pupils in front of elementary school* – Blic, 08.05.2014⁴



Fights between students in school yards, bringing knives and other weapons to schools, students being stabbed or beaten by their peers, young girls being harassed or bullied through social media, are just some of the headline news being reported across Serbia. Just recently, a young boy was hit with a brick to his head by one of his peers during an altercation right outside the school gates, where the boy himself states that the violence was by no means provoked and came out of nowhere.

Both youth and their parents often report a feeling powerless to defend themselves and their children, suggesting a serious problem to the well-being of the younger generation.

Peer to peer violence in schools

Peer to peer violence is a pressing issue in Serbia and as the problem of youth violence in schools became more evident, and initiatives for prevention of violence in schools more imperative, the scientific community started to do additional research in order further deepen our understanding of this problematic.⁵

1 Press: <http://www.pressonline.rs/info/hronika/265446/tuca-srednjoskolaca-u-novom-sadu.html>

2 Novosti: <http://www.novosti.rs/vesti/naslovna/hronika/aktuelno.291.html:451494-Maloletnik-na-sudjenju-Branio-sam-se-od-dvojice>

3 Sandzak Info: <http://www.sandzakinfor.net/info/hronika/item/7550-izboden-u-%C4%8Denik-ispred-novopazarske-gimnazije>

4 Blic: <http://www.blic.rs/Vesti/Beograd/463308/CIGLOM-U-GLAVU-Tuca-osnovaca-ispred-skole>

5 Only limited scientific data had been collected on youth violence by mid-2000.

One of the most comprehensive researches was initiated as part of the UNICEF projects “Schools without Violence”.⁶ By 2007 the first preliminary results of this survey were published in a scientific article prepared by Popadic and Plut.⁷ Although the research results were not based on a nationally representative sample, collected surveys from 26,628 respondents from 3rd – 8th grade (50 different schools across Serbia) were the most reliable of research conducted thus far.

According to the self-assessment of exposure to peer violence, 21.1% report exposure to violence in the past three months. Of these, about a fourth (5.1% of all respondents) experienced violence several times or on a daily basis. However, if we look at results indicating the number of incidents whereby respondents have themselves been perpetrators of violence towards their peers, the numbers are considerably higher. In total 41% admit to violent behavior in the past three months, suggesting that respondents are either more prepared to admit to violent behavior rather than to be seen as victims or that they do not recognize violence when it is directed towards them. In all categories, both as victims and perpetrators of violence, gender differences were observed. Boys are more frequently represented in violent interactions than girls – 22.8% versus 19.2% as victims and 47.9 versus 33.9% in the case of perpetrators.⁸

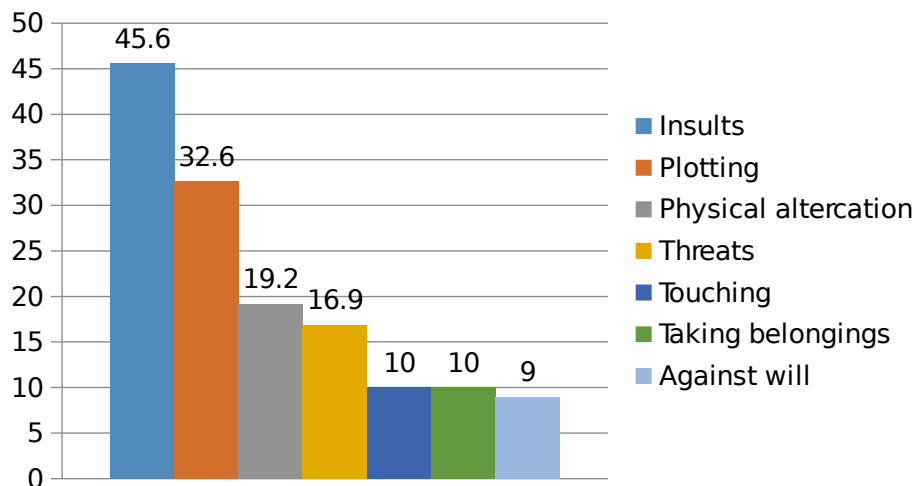
The forms of violence students were exposed to (once or several times) are manifold. The most dominant form of violence is psychological violence, which involves different forms of insults, plotting and threats, or forcing peers to do something against their will. A fifth of all students surveyed report physical violence, while 10% have been exposed to sexual harassment. Economic forms of violence, whereby students have had their belonging taken away or destroyed occurred in 10% of cases.

Graph 1: Exposure to different forms of violence (in %)

6 More information on the official website of the program:
<http://www.unicef.rs/skola-bez-nasilja.html> (19.01.2014).

7 Popadić, D. and D. Plut, (2007). Nasilje u osnovnim školama u Srbiji, oblici i učestalost [Violence in primary schools in Serbia, forms and frequency], *PSIHOLOGIJA*: 40 (2), 309-328.

8 *ibid.*: 316 - 318.



In the case of respondents admitting to being the perpetrators of violence, a similar hierarchy is evident: insulting (32.4%), physical hitting (15.6%), threatening (9.1%), touching (sexual harassment) (7.2%), and plotting (6.3%).

Additional insight can be formed on the basis research results from smaller researches relating to specific territories.⁹ For instance, a research conducted by Citic among 12 of Belgrade's primary schools indicating that children/youth involved in violence of perpetrators or perpetrators/victims are less attached to school than those who are victims or not involved in violence at all.¹⁰ Tomonjić, Blagojević-Radovanovi and Pavlović show on a sample of 417 students (age 11-15) from Uzice, how many students consider violence to be normal, how they often do not even recognize violent acts as violence, and how they are very reserved in talking about violence in schools due to fear of possible consequences.¹¹ Kodzopeljic, Smederevac and Colovic show, on a sample of 14943 students, predominantly from urban areas of Belgrade and Vojvodina, how prevalence of violence is higher in primary than in secondary schools.¹² And lastly, the most interesting results can be derived from a research conducted in 9 high-schools in Vojvodina (6254 respondents) where at least 42.2% children have had experiences of violence once, several

⁹ Several show similar results to Popadic and Plut: Nedimovic, T. (2011). Faktori rizika za pojavu vrsnjackog nasilja u osnovnim skolama [Risk factors of peer violence in primary schools]. In. *PRIMENJENA PSIHOLOGIJA* 3: 229-244.

¹⁰ Citic, P.B. (2012). Vezanost za skolu kod učenika koji imaju razlicite uloge u vrsnjackom nasilju [Pupils who have different roles in peer violence and their connection to schools]. *Specijalna edukacija i rehabilitacija*: 11 (4): 547-564.

¹¹ Tomonjić, G., Blagojević-Radovanovi, R. and J. Pavlović (2010). Koliko je nasilje prisutno u skoli. *BIBLID* 0553-4569, 56: 46-58.

¹² Kodzopeljic, J., Smedervac, S. and P. Colovic. (2010). Razlike u ucestalosti i oblicima nasilnog ponasanja izmedju učenika osnovnih i srednjih skola [Differences in frequency and type of violence between students from primary and secondary schools]. *PRIMENJENA PSIHOLOGIJA* 4: 289 - 305.

times, or regularly, during primary education and 22.7% during secondary education.¹³ Here, as in the case of Popadic and Plut's study, boys are more frequently victims of violence than girls. One of the most alarming results of this survey which are not evident in other studies is that 9.5% of respondents admit to carrying weapons to school, while the main strategies for dealing with perpetrators of violence are alarming. Although avoidance (40%) is common, reciprocation of violence with the same strength (27.5% without the help of others, 13.9% of the time with the help of others) is frequent.

Separate inquiry into internet bullying, or cyber violence as it is sometimes called, have also gained special attention in the past years. Results show that older primary school children (above 4th grade) and secondary school children are more exposed to cyber violence than younger generations: 23% of respondents have been insulted once or more times through telephone calls and 19% through SMSs; 18% of primary and 17% of secondary school youth have experienced harassment through social media; 10% report that photos or video of them have been publicized against their will; and 16% have experienced that someone used their internet profile without their consent.¹⁴ All this data suggest that internet and electronic devices have become new spaces where peer to peer violence is manifested, and should therefore be taken into account in further inquiry.

Human Security and Youth

Peer to peer violence in schools has to be seen in context of wider security threats youth is exposed to. Some of the most notable insecurities, or risk factors, in the past two decades, include: accessibility of drugs and other substances; violence in community and media, harsh economic adversities and unemployment; chauvinist and empathetic ideologies; religious extremism; war and other violence clashes; family conflicts and substance abuse; inadequate education system etc.¹⁵

In turn, these insecurities have influenced how they perceive threats, risks and challenges. Analysis of these perspectives was at the centre of a recent study conducted in 2010 by examining perception of youth in relation to threats they are exposed to and possible causes and solutions to these threats.¹⁶ The results of this study show widespread insecurities.

13 Smederevac, S., Kodzopeljic, J. and P. Colovic (2010). "Skola bez nasilja - Rezultati istrazivanja", Faculty of psychology in Novi Sad, unpublished.

14 UNICEF (2012). Digital violence in primary and secondary schools in Serbia. Project "Stop digital violence" - summary of preliminary results, unpublished.

15 Jugović, A. (2004) Rizična ponašanja omladine. Mladi zagubljeni u tranziciji. Centar za proučavanje alternativa, Beograd

16 Dulic, D., Stanarevic, S., Matovic, D. and V. Nikolic (2010), *Bezbednost mladih u Srbiji. Kako mladi procenjuju danasnje bezbednostne pretnje, rizike i izazove* [Security of Youth in Serbia. How youth perceives security threats, risks and challenges], Open Society Fund, Belgrade.

The main problems respondents and their families are facing were perceived to be poverty, unemployment, corruption and crime and traffic accidents or problems in traffic. These problems also inform their sense of security, with less than half of all youth feeling secure in their environment (42.21%).

Table 1: Problems respondents and their families are facing

	%
Poverty	49.45
Unemployment	19.47
Corruption and crime	8.49
Traffic accidents/problems	6.15
Lifestyle of youth	4.98
Inefficient public administration	4.44

Qualitative data from the same study indicates that youth see economic problems (especially unemployment), family problems (violence in the household, communication problems), lifestyles of youth (consumption of alcohol and drugs), lack of values in the society, and lastly, feelings of neglect and lack of care for young people in the society, as especially pressing.

In addition to these insecurities, almost half (49.58%) of all respondents have been victims of some form of violence during their lifetime: physical violence (38.66%), psychological violence (33.95%), emotional violence (12.55%), economic violence (10.27%), political (2.71%), and sexual (1%).

In order to break the circle of violence among youth, violence needs to be understood in the wider context of insecurity.