

School Violence in Mexico: Exploring its Dimensions and Consequences

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If school is a sounding board which amplifies what takes place outside its walls, it makes sense to ask if the forms and levels of social violence are reproduced within schools



SUMMARY

Schools, like other institutions, are immersed in conflictive environments. That is why it is not surprising that some forms of social violence are replicated among its members. However, schools are not only the recipients, but also producers of violence. This paper analyzes three dimensions of school violence--violence among peers, institutional violence and violence in social environs--and its effects on: 1) the subjective wellbeing of students and 2) the student's possible decision to leave school. The analysis was made



based on the information from 1398 surveys given to students in the third year of secondary school in ten large cities in different regions of the Mexican Republic at the end of 2012.

Key words: school violence, secondary school, school dropout, subjective wellbeing.

THE CONTEXT. VIOLENCE AS A PROBLEM

In recent years in Mexico violence has become a matter of priority in public debate and the government agenda. Every morning we wake up to newspapers, social networks, radio and television filled with alarming figures on indexes of crime, specially related to the activity of organized crime. However, contrary to what many people think, the problem of social violence lies not only nor fundamentally in bloody struggles between cartels and criminal gangs. The high degree of marginalization in which millions of Mexicans live and the functional-if not territorial-absence of the State in great regions of the country (O'Donnell, 1994), are the perfect breeding ground for the emergence of actors who think public property is for plunder, whose capture would be justified by the validation of an unjust and exclusionary social order.

If school is a sounding board which amplifies what takes place outside its walls, it makes sense to ask if the forms and levels of social violence are reproduced within schools. (Conde, 2011) This paper is a result of this concern and means to describe the levels of violence within secondary schools in Mexico, in social contexts characterized by high levels of crime.

Schools, like other institutions, are immersed in conflictive environments. Therefore, it is not surprising that some forms of social violence are replicated in schools.

However, school violence is not a simple reflection of what happens in society; school is also often a producer of violence. (Conde, 2011, 117).

Physical aggression, threats, discrimination and verbal offenses among students are relatively common phenomenon. If to these we add the arbitrary exercise of authority, denigrating name-calling of students and negligence of principals and teachers with respect to the process of teaching-learning, school can be placed in a space of risk, and not as an institution which is intended to form assertive, responsible citizens and public defenders. (Dubet, 1998).

How and to what extent do these negative actions take place within the school? How do adolescents in the national educational system live with them? How do they make the rules of the school environment their own in order to coexist-and survive-within the school? What strategies do school teachers and directors put into practice in order to process violence in this environment? Are they aware of the seriousness of the threat they face? Throughout this paper the reader will find preliminary answers to these and other questions, as a first glance at school violence in conflictive social contexts.

The information used for the analysis which follows is the result of research carried out in secondary schools in ten large cities, in general, but not exclusively capital cities- in eight states of the Mexican



Republic: Baja California, Baja California Sur, Chihuahua, Colima, Durango, Estado de Mexico, Guerrero, Tabasco and Tamaulipas. The analysis was based on information obtained through surveys given to students in the third year of secondary school.

SCHOOL VIOLENCE AND ITS DIMENSIONS

To study school violence as a public problem implies acknowledging that what goes on in the relatively closed-in space of school, closed off from external agents at the door to a large extent, is subject to scrutiny and intervention of the social body as a whole. This, which until a few years ago seemed to be unthinkable, today is possible due to the development of a growing collective consciousness of the need to prevent and attend to violence played out in closed environments (family, school, work), governed by specific rules and in general hidden from outside critical opinion, and at times from the public law. (Ortega, 2008, 19)

Thus, dealing with the problem of school violence implies taking into account the context in which it takes place; the social relationships which exist inside schools, as well as the institutional framework which contain them and which, one way or another, foster them, prevent them, sanction them or stimulate them. (Ortega, 2008, 20).

In this regard we define school violence as "any action, situation or relation happening within the physical limits of the establishment or within the framework of a social relationship developed within schools (Ajenjo and Bas, 2005), and which threatens the physical, moral, psychological or social integrity of a member of the school community, against the rules and norms of the school, the law or whatever rules the group has agreed on," (in Varela, et. Al., 2010, 12) and whose impact is "to cause physical or

psychological pain or harm to people who interact in the school environment, or [...] damage the objects which are inside this environ," affecting the peaceful coexistence in schools. (Cárdenas, 2009, 3)

Based on this definition, we are able to identify, describe and quantify three dimensions of school violence, build on three types of ties ("among peers," "between authorities and students" and "among actors who are both external to and inside the school"), each one representative of a kind of social relationship established by members of the school community, in order to next analyze their impact on the level of happiness, and related to this, on secondary students' dropping out of school.

DIMENSIONS OF SCHOOL VIOLENCE

Frequency and consequences

The manifestations of school violence are many and varied. Meanwhile the dimensions refer to three types of violence, based on the specific social relations which involve, in different ways, the member of the school community:

- Violence among peers refers to all of those situations which are injurious to personal integrity, which take place as a consequence of the interaction of students among themselves. (Ortega, 2008)
- Institutional or school violence (Abramovay, 2005, Gómez Nashiki, 1997) is all of those normative and practical conditions of the school authority (directors and teachers) which generate in the students a feeling of injustice, abuse of power or disinterest in learning.
- Violence of the environment towards the school refers to all social realities that, from outside the school, negatively affect or put in danger the safety of the school and its members. (Conde, 2011)

VIOLENCE AMONG PEERS

Almost automatically when speaking of school violence, reference is made to bullying. This concept, which has become part of the daily language in environments beyond the school, denotes behavior of systematic intimidation and/or harassment through which a student or group of students put in danger another student's(s') or classmate's (s') physical, material or emotional integrity. (Olweus, 1998)

However, the present research deals with a multiplicity of violent manifestations which exceed the problem of bullying, but which like it, harm the integrity of students and contribute to the creation of a school atmosphere of insecurity and fear, which are not favorable to the development of academic activities and/or healthy coexistence.

INSTITUTIONAL VIOLENCE

Institutional violence takes place when a series of behavioral practices, norms and/or guidelines of the authorities (directors and teachers) build a "school order" which is harmful to the integrity of the students with respect to their rights.

To be more precise, in this analysis we measured the violence "of" the school through the "the punitive and partial exercising of authority" by teachers and directors to the students. The spectrum of practices through which this type of violence is practiced is very broad, and ranges from the use of nicknames to indolence of teachers and/or authorities which may put the quality of the teaching-learning process at risk.

VIOLENCE OF THE ENVIRONMENT TOWARDS THE SCHOOL

Growing phenomenon of school violence cannot be disassociated from the breaking down of the social fabric, community cohesion or the rapidly rising levels of insecurity throughout the national territory.

We once again take up Dubet (2005) on this point when he distinguishes a kind of violence which is not exactly school violence, but rather comes from outside and enters the school; social violence that invades schools and shakes them up, confronting them with non-school psychological or social problems, for which they have no answers or do not know how to confront. (Guzmán, 2012, 122)

EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE OF THE MAGNITUDE OF "SCHOOL VIOLENCE"

The present analysis focuses on offering a quantitative image of school violence. The information comes from a total of 1,398 surveys given to public secondary school students in 10 cities in different regions of the country: Acapulco (Guerrero), Chihuahua (Chihuahua), Colima (Colima), Durango (Durango), Mexicali and Tijuana (Baja California), Reynosa (Tamaulipas), Toluca and Texcoco (Estado de México) and Villahermosa (Tabasco). The surveys were carried out between August and November 2012.

In the case of violence among peers, bullying, also known as intimidation (Elliot, 2008), harassment or abuse among peers (Olweus, 1998) is only one manifestation of this kind of violence. Therefore, the survey collected information on various kinds of behavior grouped within the category of violence among peers.









Schools, Immersed in Conflictive Surroundings.

Table 1: Incidence of violence among peers in accordance with the role played and by sex

Manifestations of violence among peers	Males		Females	
	Victims	Aggressors	Victims	Aggressors
Threats	38.76	31.74	31.11	22.60
Physical aggression	36.06	35.85	27.62	23.96
Verbal offenses and/or gestures	33.19	3r.58	28.73	29.95
Theft/taking personal objects	33.62	14.00	34.06	5.61
Threats to the family of other classmate(s)	28.14	19.71	23.32	11.15
Slander another classmate	n/d	16.86	n/d	10.14
Discrimiation against classmate	26.41	24.58	19.20	15.04
Trying to forcibly kiss or grope	36.16	24.53	43.13	11.65
Trying to undress a classmate	10.50	8.92	4.35	2.95
Try to force a classmate to have sexual relations	9.40	8.02	3.89	2.64
I have been sexually harassed on Internet	18.77	n/d	25.55	n/d
Average	27.10	25.36	24.10	13.57

Table 1 shows that the incidence of violence among peers is significant among students of both sexes. On an average 27% of the boys and 24% of the girls have suffered from at least one form of harassment or intimidation included in this survey. Likewise, the information shows that boys take on the role of aggressors more frequently than girls (25.36 compared to 13.57, respectively), and their most frequent form of violence is physical aggression while for girls verbal offenses are the most common type.

In the case of institutional violence, what was analyzed in this document was the teachers' practices of doling out discipline and/or applying the rules. We point out in this case two dimensions of institutional violence: the lack of dialogue and/or participation of students in bringing about order, as well as the existence of bias or favoritism for certain students (impartiality).

In order to measure the level of impartiality in carrying out rules in this case we used the question: "Do you agree, agree to a great degree, agree to a small degree, or not agree at all with the following information": "Teachers have teacher's pets." Likewise, in order to observe to what measure discipline was doled out openly (and relatively in a way that took into account the integrity of the students), we used as a proxy a question which allowed us to measure to what degree teachers take into account the opinion of the students in carrying out said rules. The question used in this case was, "do you agree, agree to a great degree, agree to a small degree, or not agree at all with the following statement, "Teachers only know how to keep order by punishing students?"

Table 2: Typology of school order based on doling out disciplinary measures

Teachers only know how to keep order by punishing students	Teachers do not have teachers' pets	Teachers do have teachers' pets	Total
Agree to a small degree or not at all	Democratic 367 (28.1)	Populist 246 (18.9)	613 (47.0)
Agree or agree to a great degree	Hierarchical 286 (21.9)	Authoritarian 406 (31.1)	692 (53.0)
Total	653 (50%)	652 (50%)	1305 (100%)

According to the answers of more than one thousand three hundred students in secondary schools in eight states of the Republic, the majority (31.1%) think that the only way the teachers know how to keep order is by punishing and that they do have teachers' pets. They are a part of an authoritarian order. On the other extreme, 28.1% of the students consider their teachers part of an inclusive, impartial school order.

Finally, this research shows that there is a kind of violence which is outside of the schools, but which permeates the inside; either through vandalism of gangs, or as a result of aggressive behavior of students (and parents) on the physical and moral integrity of teachers and school authorities. (Dubet, 2005)



Table 3: Expressions of violence towards the school	
Males	
Expressions of violence towards the school	% Incidents
I am a member of a gang	30,34
I have "graffitied" (walls, bathrooms)	22,64
I have been threatened by a gang	21,65
I have verbally or with signs offended an adult	20,11
I have taken part in vandalism against the school installations	19,54
I have slandered or made jokes about an adult	18,62
I have taken bladed weapons to school	18,38
I have threatened an adult (school authority, teacher)	17,21
I have taken to school and/or sold addictive substances	13,24
I have been threatened by organized crime	12,27
I taken a firearm to school	9,69
Females	
Expressions of violence towards the school	% Incidents
I have verbally or with signs offended an adult	58,04
I have "graffitied" (walls, bathroom)	24,07
I am a member of a gang	17,28
I have been threatened by a gang	11,99
I have slandered or made jokes about an adult	11,37
I have taken part in vandalism against the school installations	9,26
I have taken bladed weapons to school	8,96
I have threatened an adult (school authority, teacher)	8,47
Il have take to school and/or sold addictive substances	6,42
I have been threatened by organized crime	6,24
I have taken firearms to school	3,55

In general, as in these cases, violence towards the school is carried out by the members of the school community themselves. Students who think the school order is unfair, who do not feel protected and/or are not integrated into the social and educational dynamics of the school, may be the first link in a chain of violence against the school. According to Dubet (2005), it is one of the ways in which students express their dissatisfaction and protest of what they perceive to be an order which, contrary to their expectations, does

not acknowledge nor include them. In Mexico, this is a phenomenon which has not yet been studied very much, but which is becoming more and more important given the family and social context which condition life within schools. (Camargo Arbello, 1996)

VIOLENCE AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

Briefly, we present here two analyses which permit us to establish that violence, beyond the relative affectation of the physical and

emotional well being of the victims, negatively conditions the life story of students. This story has a personal, more intimate dimension linked to the way in which boys and girls emotionally "live" their passage through school. A second dimension, related to the first, is tied to academic performance, especially, to the possibility of students' having a positive impression of their passage through schools as a necessary condition for their social success in the future.

VIOLENCE AND SUBJECTIVE WELLBEING

Over the past years there has been growing interest in designing and implementing scales for measuring subjective wellbeing, satisfaction and happiness in various contexts, among others, school. Among these Konu et al. (2002), developed a study in which the variation of subjective wellbeing was measured at school levels and individually, using an important sample in various parts of Finland. In their study they showed, among other things, that wellbeing is influenced by the contextual conditions and social relations which are developed at

school: the school atmosphere, security, the dynamic character of groups, the relationship between professors and students, possible situations of harassment, relationships with family and coexistence. (De Pablos and González Pérez, 2012, 76-77)

Similarly, as shown in a recent study made by INEGI (National Institute of Statistics and Geography) (2013), being a victim of violence is one of many factors which creates one of the most significant negative impacts on the happiness of individuals in Mexico.

In order to analyze subjective wellbeing, the students were asked, "Do you consider yourself to be a happy person?" and the options for the answers were 1. "Yes, I'm happy," 2. "Neither happy nor unhappy," 3. "No, I'm not happy."

In the case of secondary school students, we may note that this relationship is proven. While there are differences in the kind of expressions of violence in which students are involved, we may note that those who say they have participated in acts or situations of violence present significantly lower levels of subjective wellbeing than those who say they have not participated.

Figure 1: Probability of being happy in relation to vulnerability to violence

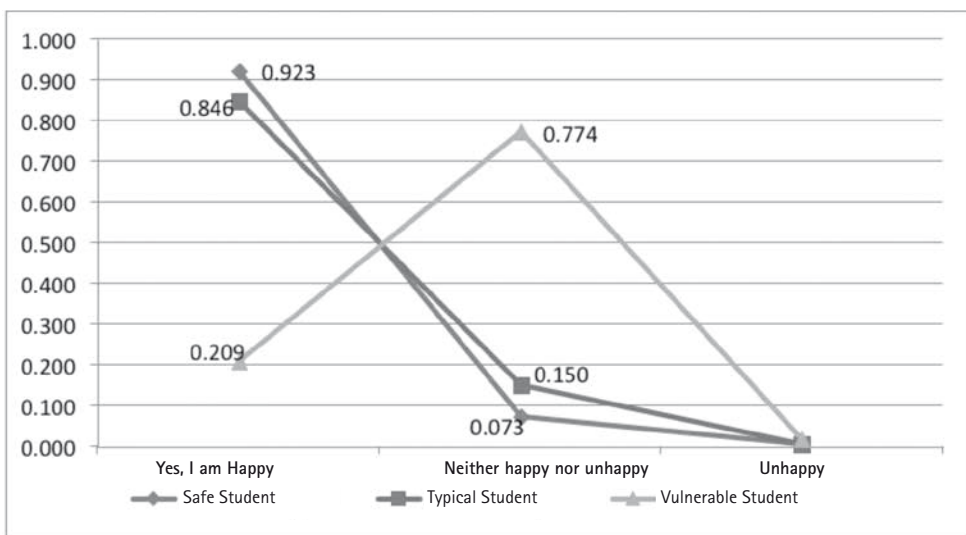


Figure 1 shows the variation in probabilities of being happy in relation to the profile of risk of violence of the students. Students with less risk of suffering violence say they are happy 92.3 percent of the time. The typical student or more frequently, the ones with moderate levels of vulnerability

to violence, say they are happy in 84.6% of the cases. Finally, for the student who is most vulnerable to violence, the probability of being happy is only 20.9%. Table 4 presents the specific characteristics of each one of the profiles with respect to the variables introduced into the model.

Table 4: Impact of vulnerability to violence on the possibility of being happy			
Explanatory Factors (risk)	Safest Profile	Typical Student	Most Vulnerable Profile
Relation with your father	Very close	Very close	Distant
Cellular phone	Yes, a smartphone	Yes, a normal one	No cellular phone
Your school is	Non-violent	A little violent	Violent
Would you tell your teacher your problems?	Yes I would	No I wouldn't	No I wouldn't
The best thing about your school is peaceful coexistence	I agree completely	I agree somewhat	I don't agree at all
The best thing about your school is the infrastructure	I agree completely	I agree somewhat	I don't agree at all
When there is team work your classmates	Always include me	Always include me	Sometimes include me
The application of rules is	Democratic	Hierarchical	Authoritarian
Have you ever participated in activities with a gang	Never	Never	Frequently
A classmate has threatened me	Never	Never	Frequently
A classmate has physically attacked me	Never	Never	Frequently
Have you graffitied school installations?	Never	Never	Frequently
An adult (teacher and/or school authority) has offended me verbally or gesturally	Never	Never	Frequently

Have you been threatened by organized crime?	Never	Never	Frequently
Sex	Male	Male	Female
Probability of "being happy"	0.923	0.846	0.209
Probability of being neither very happy nor very unhappy"	0.073	0.150	0.774
Probability of "being unhappy"	0.004	0.004	0.017

Table 4 confirms this diagnosis. The probability of feeling unambiguously happy is much higher (0.923) for children who, due to the type of ties established in the family, school and social environ, are less vulnerable to violence than those who have suffered from some type of violence, especially at school and the surrounding area. The latter do not find the protection nor contention they need within the family either.

VIOLENCE AND DROPPING OUT OF SCHOOL

Dropping out of school is often defined as abandoning school activities before finishing a grade or level in school and without obtaining the corresponding degree or certificate. (Spady, 1971) In Mexico this phenomenon generally takes place upon finishing secondary school or during the first year of high school. (Abril and others, 2008)

According to literature on the matter, dropping out of school is due to contextual as well as school factors, the former usually being determinant in the decision. The first group of factors, economic necessities and family problems stands out. In girls this is tied to early motherhood and the need of

care. (CEPAL, 2003) Likewise, many studies name as factors for dropping out, the low level of retention in education systems in Latin America. (Brewer, 2005) Lack of interest, problems in school performance related to lack of discipline or low grades, as well as the dearth of academic possibilities of good quality, motivate this dropping out. (Abril and others, 2008; Espindola and Leon, 2002)

This paper means to explore the relationship between the dimensions of school violence and the possibility of thinking of leaving school. Therefore, the same strategy was used as in the case of subjective wellbeing. Binary logistic regression was used in order to estimate which conditions heightened the tendency of a secondary school student to frequently think of quitting school.

Table 5 presents the probabilities of a secondary student's quitting school, based on the kind of relationships established by the students in their environment of development (family, school, social surroundings).



Table 5: Impact of violence on the probability of thinking of dropping out of school
Probability of having thought of dropping out of school

Explanatory Factors	Never	Occasionally or Frequently	
Relationship with your father	Very close	0,718	0,117
	Distant	0,622	0,171
Would you tell your teacher your problems?	Yes, I would	0,776	0,094
	No, I wouldn't feel comfortable with that	0,718	0,117
When there is team work your classmates ...	Always include me	0,718	0,117
	Sometimes include me	0,642	0,159
Your school is	Not violent	0,772	0,096
	Violent / Very violent	0,670	0,141
The application of rules is ...	Democratic	0,744	0,115
	Authoritarian	0,686	0,108
Have you ever participated in activities with a gang	Never	0,718	0,117
	Occasionally	0,455	0,269
Have you graffitied school installations?	Never	0,718	0,117
	Occasionally	0,611	0,187
Have you been threatened by organized crime?	Never	0,718	0,117
	Occasionally	0,747	0,145

Of the factors analyzed, it can be observed that "violence in the environment" is the key factor to understanding school dropout. Specifically those students who say they "have participated in activities with a gang," or "have graffitied school installations" and/or "have been threatened by organized crime," have greater probability of leaving school (or thinking about it) than those

who have never been a part of, or victims of these behaviors.

Once having pinpointed which factors of violence have the most impact on the probability of dropping out of secondary school, we build three profiles of students, depending on their level of vulnerability in the face of violence, taking as a reference the "modal student", the most frequent.

Table 6: Vulnerability to School Violence and Dropping out of School

Explanatory factors	"Safe" student	Typical student	"Vulnerable" student
Relation with your father	Very close	Very close	Distant
Would you tell your teacher your problems	Yes, I would	No, I wouldn't	No, I wouldn't
When there is team work, your classmates...	Always include you	Always include you	Sometimes include you
Your school is...	Not violent	A little violent	Violent
The best thing about your school is peaceful coexistence	I agree completely	I agree somewhat	I don't agree at all
The best thing about your school is its infrastructure	I agree completely	I agree somewhat	I don't agree at all
The application of rules is...	Democratic	Hierarchical	Authoritarian
A classmate has physically attacked me	Never	Never	Frequently
A classmate has threatened me	Never	Never	Frequently
A school authority has offended me verbally	Never	Never	Frequently
Have you ever participated in activities with a gang?	Never	Never	Frequently
Have you graffitied school installations?	Never	Never	Frequently
Have you been threatened by organized crime?	Never	Never	Frequently
Sex	Male	Male	Female
Probability of not having thought of dropping out of school	0,900	0,718	0,004



Probability of having thought of dropping out of school, but not seriously	0,050	0,164	0,255
Probability of having thought of dropping out of school often	0,050	0,117	0,704

What is shown in Table 6 is that, indeed, those who suffer most from the effects of school violence, are much more prone to thinking about dropping out of school more frequently (59 points more than the "average" student and 64 more than the "safe" student). This information leaves no doubt about the relevance of the problem and the need for approaching it integrally, above and beyond its frequency or extent.

CONCLUSIONS

In the case of Mexican secondary schools, we observe that violence among peers is the most common form of violence, but that it is only a part of the broader school environment in which institutional violence and violence in the environ mix, making it difficult to deal with them separately.

Statistical analysis shows that peer violence is the violence with the most impact on the wellbeing of the students. Those who have been the victim of this kind of violence most frequently, have greater probabilities of not feeling happy. However, the dimension which has the most influence on adolescents' decision to drop out of school is violence in the environment. Those who have participated more frequently in these

kinds of manifestations (being members or victims of gangs, graffiting school walls) are far more prone to thinking about dropping out of school, either because the school is an unsafe place or because they believe that social success is not obtained through school life.

Thus, in the future, the ideas of school environment, school culture and peaceful coexistence may be useful. What needs to be done is to not deal with manifestations and victims and aggressors in an isolated way, but to transform the dynamics of violent relations within the school. If violence is recurrent, it is because school culture, normative order and the type of relationships--not only school, but also social--promote it, or at best, tolerate it.

Successful experiences stress--at the school level--the importance of recovering the knowledge of school communities, and especially of involving each and every member of the community in the roles of guarantors of peaceful coexistence. Likewise, in the field of public policy, a transversal approach must be applied. Psychology, sciences of education, applied ethics and social science can work together, in diagnosing the problems as well as in designing and evaluating available solutions.

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