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|  <p>ISSN NO. 2320-5407</p> | <p>Journal Homepage: - <a href="http://www.journalijar.com">www.journalijar.com</a></p> <p><b>INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF<br/>ADVANCED RESEARCH (IJAR)</b></p> <p>Article DOI: 10.21474/IJAR01/22044<br/>DOI URL: <a href="http://dx.doi.org/10.21474/IJAR01/22044">http://dx.doi.org/10.21474/IJAR01/22044</a></p> |  |
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### RESEARCH ARTICLE

## SCHOOL BASED VIOLENCE: SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS PERSPECTIVES IN SIERRA LEONE

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### Manuscript Info

#### Manuscript History

Received: 19 August 2025

Final Accepted: 21 September 2025

Published: October 2025

#### Key words:-

School Based Violence, Innate Drive  
Theories, Environmental Theories

### Abstract

The study is centered on school violence in public secondary schools in Sierra Leone. It was initiated against the backdrop that little attention is paid to the impact it has on school going children. There is a dearth of literature that needs to be addressed. The objects were to determine the individual and school based factors responsible for school violence. The study employed a qualitative approach and descriptive design. The research tool is a structured questionnaire and descriptive analysis was used for data analysis. Findings revealed that both individual and school factors are responsible. Therefore, it is recommended that relevant authorities/parties empower and capacitate school authorities to devise intervention techniques to combat violence in schools. In addition, collaboration among teachers, parents and stake holders are recommended to address the problem.

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### Introduction:-

School violence is a subcategory of violent conduct by adolescence and it has been classified as a public health issue. It is violent behavior by school going children and generally occurs on school premises and outside the school especially during extracurricular programs such as soccer games and sporting events. The study delved into the factors responsible for the increase in violence in public schools. School violence is a global phenomenon that affects one of the core institutions (education) of modern society and to some extent in virtually all nation-states. According to UNESCO (2017) report, over a quarter billion of school-going children experience some kind of violence annually. It is difficult to come up with a single definition of violence due to its complex nature of human behavior that has been studied through different approaches.

Therefore, one should connect with a definition that reflects the heterogeneity of the theories to be discussed later. It is pertinent to point out that the term violence is used at times as a synonym for aggression. Even though aggression and violence might seem equivalent, there is a general agreement in their difference in nature and origin, (Mashaba, et al., 2020). Tian and Zhang (2023) and Turanovic & Siennick (2022) highlighted the differences between the two main dimensions of violent behavior: (a) behavioral dimension that implies the use of hostile conduct with the sole purpose of causing damage, and (b) an intentional dimension where violence is used as a mean to achieve someone's own interests. These two dimensions are known as hostile violence, which refers to an unplanned, rage based, impulsive behavior usually after being provoked with the main objective of causing damage. In addition is instrumental violence; a violent planned behavior with the sole purpose of achieving specific objectives by the aggressor and not as a reaction to a previous provocation.

Tutanovic & Siennick 2022) presented other complex classifications of violent behavior including direct, physical, or manifest versus indirect or relational); and between different functions of violence such as reactive or defensive versus offensive, proactive or instrumental (Turanovic & Siennick, 2022). Opara (2021) and Mashaba et al. (2020) affirmed that violence is the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against a group or community that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation. School violence as a subset of youth violence is a broader public health problem. As stated previously, it is adolescent violence that occurs on school property, on the way to, or from school or during a school-sponsored event in which a student can be a victim, a perpetrator, or a witness (Bara, 2022). It is a kind of behavior that includes the general characteristics of violent behavior, in which the actors are children/adolescents and that it takes place in schools. Different parties within the schools environment can also be involved either as perpetrators or victims with short and long-term consequences. Exposure to violence can lead to a wide range of health issues such as depression, anxiety, fear and other psychological problem (UNESCO, 2017; UNICEF, 2023).

There are risk factors associated with violence although it does not necessarily imply that a young person commits a violent behavior due to those factors. Research has revealed factors that are responsible for individuals who more likely to commit violent acts. Such risk factors increase the likelihood for an individual to become violent, but these factors are not necessarily direct causes of school violence (Ferrara et al., 2019). When it comes to prevention, the object is simply to stop it from occurring in the first place. According to the 2017 Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS), 9 out of every 10 students in basic education have experienced at least one form of physical violence. More appallingly is that 86.5 percent of children between the ages of 1-14 years have experienced some form of violence in the household (Stats SL, 2018). In some communities, gang members recruit school going children to join them resulting in increase in school violence.

Over the years, school violence has been a recurring problem occurring within and outside the schools' environment. The Government White Paper on the Report of the Commission of Inquiry into the Poor Performance of Students in the 2008 BECE and WASSCE (Gbananja Report) captured violence and highlighted incidents of riotous occasions. Encounters among schools in soccer and other sporting competitions resulted in violent conduct (GoSL, 2008). It has now become the norm for school going children to fight each other within and outside the school premise against rival schools during the inter-secondary school sports meeting. As a result, some of these events have been banned. Many schools have cliques that mimic behaviors school-gangs or street-gangs elsewhere and coverage on violent behavior such as fights and riots are regularly shown on the mainstream and social media (Capistrano et al., 2022). It is against this backdrop that school authorities should take steps to create a safe environment for learning within the school. Nonetheless, it is now becoming very difficult to do so prompting intervention of State law enforcement, which has led to more volatile situations.

#### **Research Problem:-**

School authorities have not placed much emphasis on school violence despite the general assumption that these experiences disrupt the education of students. The escalation of violence in public schools has become a serious public concern since it is not only among students but also in the communities as well (Capistrano et al., 2022). Due to the high incidence of violence, schools are no longer seen as safe and secure environments where children can learn, enjoy themselves, and feel protected. Mindful about the effects of violence and its consequence on education delivery and the government's development agenda; this study will probe the factors (individual and school) driving school violence in the research domain in order to address it. Not knowing the causes of this conduct would inhibit design of interventions aimed at addressing the menace. Furthermore, strategies and policies wouldn't be grounded on assumptions or anecdotal evidence but empirical fact to aid effective design and implementation.

In addition, there is a dearth of literature on school violence or violence at school when it comes to Sierra Leone. This represents a literature gap that should be plugged. Most of the studies on school violence from other jurisdictions do not employ quantitative strategies but are mostly qualitative ethnographic or exploratory design. This also indicates a local gap for quantitative studies. Additionally, this study is undertaken to address these gaps.

#### **Research Questions:**

##### **The research addresses the following questions:**

1. Are there individual factors responsible for violence in public secondary schools in the Freetown municipality of Sierra Leone?

2. To what extent are school related factors responsible for violence in public secondary schools in the Freetown municipality of Sierra Leone?

## **Literature Review:-**

This section reviews both theoretical and empirical studies.

### **Theoretical Review:**

A fundamental step in trying to understand the mechanisms implied in school violence entitles a review of the general theories that explain the origin of the violent and aggressive behaviors. They could be divided into two broad theoretical groups, namely, innate drive theories and environmental theories. Innate drive theories see aggressiveness as an innate human component where aggressive acts respond to impulses or internal motivations of the person, which are necessary for their adaptation process (Comu et al., 2023). Environmental theories stress the influence that the environment or social context exert on violent behavior and consider that the person carries out an active role throughout the learning processes (Turanovic & Siennick, 2022). The environment is therefore regarded as mainly responsible for the origin of violence.

### **Innate Drive Theories:**

The main innate drive theories include the genetic theory, the ethological theory, the psychoanalytic theory, the personality theory and the frustration theory. The genetic theory upholds the origin of the aggression is found in particular organic pathologies. The ethological theory maintains that aggression is an adaptability reaction to guarantee survival. The psychoanalytic theory is that aggression is the result of a cluster of negative tensions provoked by the repression of the libido. On the contrary, the personality theory is about aggression based on personality traits that determine the individual's behavior. The frustration aggression theory upholds that the impossibility of reaching a prefixed aim provokes frustration (and anger), which leads to the aggressive behavior (Turanovic & Siennick, 2022).

### **Environmental Theories:**

The main environmental theories uphold that the environment influences future violent behavior; and include the social learning theory, the social interaction theory, the sociological theory, and the ecological systems theory. The social learning theory maintains that aggression is learnt through the observation of praises after violent behaviors are carried out by significant models. On the other hand, the social interaction theory stipulates that aggression is the product of the interaction between the person and the influence of his/her immediate social environment. The sociological theory argues that the cultural, political and economic characteristics as well as the society's predominant values system are the bases for aggressive behavior. On the contrary, the ecological theory asserts that aggressive behavior is a product of the interconnection between the person and four influence levels: microsystem, meso-system, exo-system and macro-system (Comu et al., 2023). It is relevant to note that even though these theories have been hailed and critiqued, none could put forward a universal explanation to elicit the causes and consequences of violent behaviors exhibited by school children. However, after an examination of all the theories, one can project that the theory that best explains our understanding and complexity of adolescent violent behavior is the ecological theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

### **Empirical Review:**

This section contains literature related to the main risk factors associated with school violence. It can be better understood by examining the combination and interaction of different elements that involve both the individual and his/her school (social) context in accordance with the ecological approach.

### **Individual Factors:**

The main individual factors associated with violent behavior during adolescence are biological, genetic and psychological elements. They refer to the influence that the genetic information transmitted by the parents has in the development of some characteristics or peculiarities in the children (UNESCO, 2017). Some biological theories maintain that aggression could be the manifestation of a genetic or chemical influence and, organic pathological syndromes such as the chromosomal abnormality (XYY) or certain biochemical and hormonal processes.

Moreover, if one considers the distinction between aggression and violence, it could be argued that, even if ethologists maintain that aggressiveness is embedded in the genes of every human being, it is most probable that no one is born violent. Against this backdrop, one could infer that the step from aggression, as an adaptation

mechanism, into violence, understood as an intentional human behavior, is mediated by the socialization processes and, therefore, by the main socialization agents such as the school (Tian & Zhang, 2023).

One of the psychological factors related to behavioral problems during adolescence is irritability which is the tendency to react in an impulsive and abrupt way to small provocations closely linked to a low tolerance for frustration and lack of empathy or the ability to put oneself on the other person's place and recognize and perceive the emotions from the other. It also involves poor satisfaction with life in general; the desire of dominating others and of showing power through a non-conformist social reputation based on respect; and a negative attitude towards the social rules and institutional authorities (Ferrara et al., 2019). Even if some of these factors are considered individual, the fact that they constitute beliefs, attitudes and thinking, place them in the social component category due to situations such as empathy, social reputation and attitude towards institutional authority. In fact, those characteristics of the person are balanced by the adolescent's experience in his/her immediate social contexts.

#### **School Factors:**

Studies have revealed that some intrinsic characteristics related to educational centers contribute to violent behaviors in the schools due to overcrowded classrooms, no clear behavioral regulations for the students and the authoritarian teacher management style (Ncontsa & Shumba, 2013). In addition to these general factors in education settings, there are other more specific factors in classroom management related to the student's behavioral problems, such as: highly competitive activities, isolation and social rejection, tolerance, peers' perception of violent situations, learning interpersonal skills and ignorance of conflict resolution (Maphumulo, 2018). Netshitangani (2014) averred that peers may also constitute a crucial influence in the development of behavioral problems. The author maintained that aggressive behavior by some adolescents in the school is due to socializing with friends who exhibit those behaviors. They create and define their own codes and norms and reinforce by approving their own behavior. Burton and Leoschut (2013) argues that the link the adolescent has with the school contexts is one of the most relevant predictors of antisocial behaviors.

In addressing measures to combat aggressive behavior, Netshitangani (2014) is of the view that when teachers establish positive relationship with their students by offering them individual attention, respect and support them, aggressive behavior in the classroom will decrease. On the contrary, teachers who exhibit negative attitude towards their students contribute in promoting aggressive behavior in the classroom. Another school factor associated with behavioral problems in adolescence is social acceptance by peers. (Ncontsa & Shumba, 2013; Tian & Zhang, 2023) argued that not all students who face rejection by their peers are violent. Rejected students seem to be, therefore, a heterogeneous group in which at least two subgroups have been identified: aggressive rejected and non-aggressive rejected. Most students who are rejected exhibit a violent behavior profile while some are passive and shy and do not exhibit aggressive behavior in school (Maphumulo, 2018).

#### **Methodology:-**

The research employed a descriptive design in order to provide a picture of status quo regarding respondents' views on the factors responsible for school violence. The research domain is the Freetown, capital city of Sierra Leone, having highest number of schools and is also the epicenter of school violence. A quantitative approach involving the use of a numerical data collection in the form of a structured questionnaire and statistical analysis of data (Creswell, 2012). The research population comprised all individual students in public schools. Accordingly, the 2022 Annual School Census was the sample frame used to draw a sample from the population, using random sampling. The sample size at 95% level of confidence and  $\pm 5\%$  margin of error is 382 according to the sample-size calculator ([www.surveysystem.com](http://www.surveysystem.com)). The research tool is a structured questionnaire consisting of items on a 5-point Likert Scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) – strongly agree (5). A Cronbach Alpha test of internal reliability resulted in a coefficient of 0.72 that is high reliability and internal consistency (Ibid). Both primary and secondary data were sourced. In conclusion, the research adhered to ethical rules of informed consent, voluntary participation, privacy, anonymity and confidentiality in data collection.

#### **Data Analysis and Interpretation:**

##### **Individual Factors:**

The following table contains the results of the analysis of data regarding individual factors presumed to be responsible for school violence over the years.

**Table 1: Averages of responses on individual factor items**

| Items                            | N    | Mean | Standard Deviation |
|----------------------------------|------|------|--------------------|
| Irritability                     | 1047 | 3.85 | 0.78335            |
| Impulsivity                      | 1047 | 3.75 | 1.01876            |
| Low frustration tolerance        | 1047 | 3.87 | 0.96038            |
| Low empathy                      | 1047 | 4.27 | 0.69420            |
| Poor satisfaction with life      | 1047 | 3.74 | 0.86012            |
| Desire of dominating others      | 1047 | 3.88 | 0.87939            |
| Non-conformist social reputation | 1047 | 3.88 | 0.71464            |
| Negative attitude to authority   | 1047 | 4.15 | 0.60927            |

**Source: primary data**

On the scale measuring individual factors, the mean scores of the items in Table 4.1 indicate that low empathy is a major cause of increased violence in school. Out of the eight items, low empathy registered the highest mean score of 4.27. Negative attitude towards authority is another individual factor responsible for school violence obtained a mean score of 4.15. There is a tie between desire of dominating others and non-conformist social reputation. Both items secured a mean score of 3.88 respectively. Low frustration tolerance has a mean score of 3.87, while irritability has a mean score of 3.85. Impulsivity has a mean score of 3.75 and the least of all is a mean score 3.14 related to poor satisfaction with life. All the items relating to individual factors scale registered a score greater than 3.0. The results indicated that respondents agreed to all of the items on the individual factor scale.

**School Factors:**

The following table contains the results of the descriptive analysis of responses relating to school based factors perceived responsible for the increase in school violence

**Table 2: Averages on responses to school factors items**

| Items                                  | No   | Mean | Standard Deviation |
|----------------------------------------|------|------|--------------------|
| Poor organization of the school/center | 1047 | 3.21 | 1.15728            |
| Lack of motivation from teachers       | 1047 | 3.36 | 1.00020            |
| Violence tolerance                     | 1047 | 3.76 | 0.75371            |
| Negative environment in the classroom  | 1047 | 3.53 | 0.88140            |
| Friends with problem behavior          | 1047 | 3.73 | 0.76350            |
| Negative teacher-student relationship  | 1047 | 3.49 | 1.07774            |
| Social rejection by peers              | 1047 | 3.31 | 0.92872            |

**Source: primary data**

According to Table 4.3, tolerance for violence and having problematic peers obtained the highest mean scores of 3.76 and 3.73 respectively. Negative environment in the classroom obtained a mean score of 3.53. Negative teacher-student relationship has a mean score of (3.49). Lack of motivation from teachers obtained a mean score of 3.36, and social rejection by peers obtained a mean score of (3.31). Poor organization of the school/center has the lowest mean score of (3.21). In general, there was overwhelming agreement that school factors as responsible for the increase in violence.

**Conclusion and Recommendation:-****Conclusion:-**

Although school violence is not a new phenomenon, the issue has gained more momentum lately due to a spike. The study focused on identifying the factors responsible by targeting the Freetown municipality as the research being the central hub of the country and has experienced a high rate of violence in over the years. Specifically, the research set out to identify the individual and school factors that are main leading causes. Analysis of data collected indicated the foremost items in the individual and school factors categories that respondents agreed are responsible for increase in school violence. Findings revealed that every element in the individual and school factor scale were to some extent responsible for school violence. Thus, the study concludes by capturing individual and school factors mostly responsible for incidents of school violence.

**Recommendation:-**

**Based on the findings, the following recommendations for addressing school violence are proffered:**

1. The government, school authorities and other stakeholderstackle factors that could trigger negative behaviors promptly.
2. Empower and capacitate teachers to address indiscipline in general and violence in particular through establishingclear rules and policies that would be implemented.
3. Parents are encouraged to instill discipline in their children through proper and adequate guidance.
4. Teamwork among teachers and parents along with the involvement of the public and all stakeholders to address the problem. Media access should be appropriate and content in line with the behavioral and developmental needs of students.

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