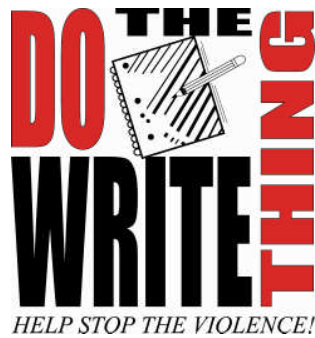




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**BACK**



**Do the Write Thing:  
Analysis of Charlotte Middle School Students' Essays on Violence and  
Drugs<sup>1</sup>**



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<sup>1</sup> This report is a community service project for Fighting Back and the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Drug Free Coalition.

## **Do the Write Thing: Analysis of Middle School Students' Essays on Violence and Drugs**

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Do the Write Thing Essay Challenge is a national writing contest first initiated by the National Campaign to Stop Violence in 1994. Since 1999 the Mecklenburg County Fighting Back Program has managed the local initiative.

According to Fighting Back, one of the program's primary objectives is to motivate students to make a personal commitment, in writing, to help prevent and reduce youth violence in their homes, schools, and communities. The essays are designed to have students express their concerns about subjects such as domestic violence, easy access to guns, and gang activity. During fall 2007 Charlotte-Mecklenburg middle schools were offered the opportunity to have their 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade classes participate by writing essays. These essays directly or indirectly addressed four questions:

- 1) How does violence affect your daily life?
- 2) Where are you confronted by violence?
- 3) What are some of the causes of youth violence?
- 4) What can you do as youth to reduce violence in your community?

### **Method**

1000 essays were collected from eleven middle schools in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg schools. Being voluntary, not all schools or classes within schools participated. Not all schools were identifiable. Of these, 899 essays were analyzed. Students were offered the opportunity to respond in any written form. Therefore, some essays were excluded because they did not address directly address the questions in essay

form. However, the number of essays is large. This gives the opportunity to identify themes. Each essay was read by four different reviewers, each focusing on one of the primary questions. A “content analysis” was performed whereby the reviewers identified specific words or themes and then recorded the number of times it was mentioned in the essay. Statistics were then generated for each word. The reviewers participated in a group discussion session to identify any over-arching themes.

### **Findings**

#### **Question One: How does violence affect your daily life?**

##### ***Frequent words (in rank order – most frequently used first)***

afraid, unsafe, pain, sad, nervous, school performance, personal relations (family, peers, authority figures), privileges lost (curfews), depression, normal (common,) suicidal thoughts, hopelessness, distrust, move (relocate),

##### ***Themes and context***

There was a common consensus among the different papers that in some way or another they were all affected by violence, either through witnessing it or being victims themselves. Violence made students feel nervous and angry, often sad. While not significant in number *per se*, 30 expressed feelings of depression and 16 even mentioned having suicidal thoughts.

The dominant theme, however, is one of being afraid and feeling unsafe in their surroundings, especially in their schools and neighborhoods. Importantly, they write that it affects their school performance because of fights in the hall or in the classroom, which they suggest disturbs their learning and most often distracts the teacher.

A second theme was the threats of a gang who was going to come into the school to kill people, and many said they would stay home for several days until they felt safe again. For these students, they suggested that they would be distracted from their schoolwork at school and then, for safety issues, ended up doing more poorly in their academic studies.

A third theme suggested was that as a result of both the children and their parents being afraid for their safety, many ended up relocating to a different school in the Charlotte area while others were given fewer privileges and curfews.

There was a fourth, and perhaps more ominous theme suggesting that a number of students have become desensitized to violence either because they saw through video games, TV, movies, etc. They expressed an “oh well” attitude that as long as it didn’t happen to them personally or to someone they knew, it was “part of life.”

A final theme that was expressed was that exposure to violence had a more personal effect on their own behavior. Violence has had an impact on their personal relations with family peers and with authority figures such as teachers. The theme is that they confessed to acting out with their parents or would begin fighting, sometimes physically, with their siblings and even with their peers.

### *Analysis*

A statistically significant difference was found by school for the impact of violence on their school performance ( $p < .018$ ). This impact was mentioned in essays in 7 of the 11 schools and most frequently in Carmel, J.M. Robinson and Southwest Middle.

Thoughts of suicide were mentioned at least once in essays from 6 of the 11 schools ( $p < .007$ )<sup>2</sup>. These are the same six schools where “depression” was most frequently mentioned ( $p < .027$ ).

Imposed curfews by parents for student safety was mentioned in five of 11 schools ( $p < .048$ ). It was most frequently mentioned in essays from Carmel, Davidson, J.M. Alexander, J.M. Robinson, and South West.

- While not statistically significant, girls were more likely to mention feeling “unsafe” than boys.
- 8<sup>th</sup> grade students were more likely to mention being afraid than 7<sup>th</sup> grade students ( $p < .025$ ).

## **Question Two: Where are you confronted by violence?**

### ***Frequent words (in rank order)***

friends/peers, school, parents, streets, abuse, TV, family, video games, news, music, movies, adults, father, media, cousins, mother, bus

### ***Themes and context***

While most people recognize the importance of peer pressure and acceptance, these essays suggest that the most significant place where student face violence is that very same group. Violence for Charlotte middle school students is immediate and appears to have become part of how many find acceptance. In 489 of the 899 essays (54.4%), reference to peers and violence is mentioned *at least* once. It was mentioned on the average of twice and the range of references was from one to nine.

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<sup>2</sup> This figure represents the probability that a finding could happen by chance. As a general rule, it is assumed that the results are statistically significantly related, and not a chance occurrence, if the probability is less than .05)

The first theme, then, is violence as part of peer pressure and the need to be accepted. Almost every essay talked about the influence of peer pressure in one way or another. A majority of the essays included the phrase, "To be cool or to fit in." A number of essays referred to fighting or using drugs so that they could fit in with the cool crowd. Some of them even acknowledge that they are making the wrong kinds of friends, but they want to fit in at any cost. Some say peer pressure has caused them to join gangs, start fights, and use drugs. They also mention peer pressure as hurting their academic performance because other kids will pressure them to skip school or get in trouble so that they get expelled from school.

A second theme is that violence is very much part of both school life. Forty-one percent of the essays mention school as a place they are confronted with violence. The essays refer to witnessing fights at school between their peers. Students write about people crowding around fights and chanting to encourage the fight to continue. Some students say that they have been expelled from school or sent to boot camp for fighting at school. They talk about fights disrupting their learning in the classroom and being scared to walk down the hallway or into the bathrooms. Many of the essays include comments about weapons in school. Some of the essays mention their parents keeping them out of school because of threats of violence. They see school shootings on the news (mentioned by about 10%) and then expect events like that can take place in their own school.

The third theme regarding where students are confronted with violence is in their neighborhoods (34.8%). They see neighborhood violence associated with gangs. The phrase, "I don't feel safe to walk out my front door" appears multiple times. The fear of

walking down the street is also mentioned repeatedly. Approximately 20% mention their neighborhood street as the place where they confront violence.

A fourth but significant theme is violence within the family. A variety of terms/references are used but violence between “parents” was referenced in 28.7% of essays, 20% said “home” and 18% referenced “family” while “father,” “mother,” “sister,” “brother,” and “cousins” were common references. Even “aunt” and “uncle” were mentioned. These essays refer to considerable domestic violence with descriptions of parents “arguing” or physically beating each other. Some admit that they have been hit or yelled at by their mothers and fathers. References were also made to how their friends are being abused. The idea of child abuse appears in a majority of the papers. Most of the students mention child abuse as an influence on kids whether they have personally experienced it or not.

A fifth theme refers to violence on TV, in movies and music; some refer to the “media” in general. Regardless of the terms, there is a keen awareness in the essays of violence in entertainment.

### ***Analysis***

There are no differences by school in which students indicate that they are confronted by violence.

- Between 20%-30% of students *in each school* made reference to confronting violence between parents.
- Between 30%-45% of students *in each school* made reference to confronting violence in school.
- 45-60% of students *in each school* made reference to confronting violence in peer relations.

Only one statistically significant difference was found by gender:

- Girls were more likely to write that they confront violence by parents (31.3 to 22.8%;  $p < .023$ ).

It should be noted, however, that girls were also slightly more likely to say they confront violence by peers (53.4% to 47.2%).

For cases where grade is known, there are two significant differences:

- 7<sup>th</sup> grade students are significantly more likely than 8<sup>th</sup> grade student to write that they confront violence at school (49.2% to 33.9%;  $p < .007$ ).
- 7<sup>th</sup> grade students are significantly more likely than 8<sup>th</sup> grade student to write that they confront violence in their neighborhoods (37.2% to 26.4%;  $p < .007$ ).

### **Question Three: Causes of violence**

#### ***Frequent words (in rank order)***

gangs, drugs, peer pressure, drug-using parents, alcohol, guns, gossip, weak family bonds, issues at home, arguments, neighborhood crime, teasing, bullying, no parental supervision, money, music, racism, insults

#### ***Themes and context***

The primary and dominant perceptions of the causes of violence by 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade students are gangs and drugs. 374 (38.6%) of the 899 essays *specifically* use the word gangs and 29.5% (n=265) use the word drugs. When elaborating about violence and gangs, they wrote that kids join gangs and involve themselves in violence to fit in with that gang. They also stated that the reasons youth join gangs is because they want a family or to feel like they belong to a family.

In addition to gangs, students think that *drugs, in one way or another, cause most of today's violence*. The influence of drugs is reflected in the statement in 110 essays that the problem was drug-using parents!

Peer pressure is a clear second theme. As mentioned in essays addressing where students are confronted with violence, peer pressure is very strong. It is apparent that youth are expected by other youth to be “tough and strong”, to not back down from “insults” and “arguments” and to respond assertively to “gossip.” Violence is associated with creating and maintaining an identity, to be “tough” or be part of a gang, and to fulfill gang/peer expectations.

A third perception of the cause of violence as reported in these essays is the nature of interpersonal and family relationships. “Issues at home” is a phrase used in a number of essays as was ‘jealousy.’ Students write about how violence comes from “bad” or “failed” relations and weak family bonds (about 10%). Some attributed youth violence to “no parental supervision,” especially in essays talking about parental use of drugs. Even though essays stated that drugs and gangs were the main cause of violence they also suggested that the reason for drug abuse and joining gangs is because of family issues. Some essays stated that parents don’t discipline like they should, they don’t care or listen to their child, and they fight with their spouse, or abuse the child. It was clear that a number of the students who wrote the essays were speaking from experience and have abusive or neglecting parents.

The essays identify some of the dimensions of interpersonal problems: teasing, bullying, insults, money, and racism. Violence is seen as a means of responding to each

of these challenges. The comments were very matter-of-fact in that reference was made within a context of these factors being common experiences.

A final theme emerging associates the cause of violence with neighborhood crime rates and the availability of guns. This links to the confrontation with violence students see in their neighborhoods. They are clearly aware that neighborhood crime, gangs, drugs and guns are a volatile combination.

### *Analysis*

Perceptions of the causes of violence show no variance between schools.

The *only* difference by gender is that girls are twice as likely to believe that one of the causes of violence is “gossip,” ( $p < .01$ ).

There are a few significant differences in the perception of causes of violence by grade:

- 8<sup>th</sup> grade students are more likely than 7<sup>th</sup> grade students to write that **alcohol** is a cause of violence (19.8% to 11.4%;  $p < .025$ ).
- 8<sup>th</sup> grade students are more likely than 7<sup>th</sup> grade students to write that **guns** are a cause of violence (14.6% to 8.3%;  $p < .07$ ).
- 7<sup>th</sup> grade students are more likely than 8<sup>th</sup> grade students to write that **gangs** are a cause of violence (38.6% to 28.1%;  $p < .03$ ).

### **Question Four: Solutions to Violence**

#### *Frequent words (in rank order)*

no solution, more activities, stay away, talk/advice, better laws, police, involve adults, supervision

### *Themes and context*

The most common response was that they saw no solution (21.6%). Many wrote that violence would never stop and so there were a number of “solution” offered but there was no common theme except that violence was an inevitable part of life; violence would never stop and there was nothing they could do as students to make a difference. There were clearly feelings of helplessness expressed.

The question regarding solutions to violence specifically asked “What can I do to help stop violence?” When they sought to provide solutions it they were rarely written in terms of what they, themselves, could do. A few wrote “stay away” (14.7%), or “say no” (2.4%) or have “good friends (3.0%).

Students just could not personalize the solution. The solutions mostly centered on what other, “more important” people could do. For example, many students wrote that police needed to patrol the streets more, laws should be harsher, and the principle at school should hire more security. Any solutions offered were generally non-personal and structural. The most frequently used words were “more activities” (18.0%). Those who suggested this solution put it in the context of the creation of a “free” community center where they could interact with other students, do homework, and stay off of the streets.

### *Analysis*

Differences were found between schools on this last question but the data are significantly skewed to analyze.<sup>3</sup> Some differences were found by gender and grade but

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<sup>3</sup> We have serious questions about these responses. A number of the essays in the same packet with the same teacher had very similar answers, suggesting teacher “coaching.” For example, in two packets, “outreach programs” and “boot camps” seemed to be particularly popular, yet those ideas were not seen in any other packet of essays. Likewise, “more laws” were written in 50% of the essays at one school but fewer than 14% of the essays in other schools mentioned laws. “More police” and “stay away” also showed significantly skewed responses to distrust the results.

these are a result of the skewed differences between schools and are, therefore, also questionable.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

There can be no doubt that students writing essays for the “Do the Write Thing” contest are significantly impacted by violence and drugs in their daily lives. For many there is no escape, no safe-haven. Violence is part of their lives at school, in their neighborhoods and even in their own homes. If anything stands out, it is the consistent statements reflecting students’ exposure to both domestic and school violence, especially in descriptions of how students actually interact with each other. Students are concerned about gangs and express feelings of being afraid and unsafe. Some clearly admit that violence disrupts their learning. The violence around them makes them nervous and distrustful. A small number, but significant by implication, express feelings of depression and even suicide. If students aren’t directly confronted by the violence they are indirectly confronted by having restrictions placed on them by their parents (curfews) or otherwise restricted in their activities making them angry.

Student explanations of the causes of violence reflect how “up-close” it is to them. Gangs and drugs emerge as the primary reasons given. The role of drugs is not merely street drugs and drug dealing but also the use of drugs and alcohol by their own parents and family members. Statements of substance abuse at home were often followed by vivid descriptions of domestic violence and child abuse. The availability of guns as a factor in violence is not lost on these 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade students.

An underlying and significant perception reflected in the essays is that violence is a way of gaining status and acceptance among peers. The students see that being “tough”

and responding violently to insults, teasing and bullying is *expected* behavior. Confrontations become honor-contests where being tough and strong is more important than being smart. Girls are especially more likely than boys to see “gossip” as a provocation to violence while both male and female students express the view that aggressive behavior is a means to being “accepted.”

As intimately associated with violence as the students appear to be, there is little insight into solutions. There is no reason to expect youth to have insight into solutions. Both students and the general public believe that the solution to violence lies in tougher laws, more police and measures that do not address the actual causes: social values attributing status to standing tough; respect coming from physical prowess rather than intellectual accomplishment; poor communication and conflict resolution skills; and a well-ingrained belief in individualism with a lack of empathy and respect for others.

What is ominous and raises concern from this review is the extent to which the students accept violence as commonplace and the extent to which many appear desensitized to it, considering it “part of life.” The source of desensitization is not clear but with a number of references to TV, movies, news, and music as to where they are confronted by violence, it is reasonable to assume that there really is no escape from it for them.

A question must be asked: What is the future for these young essayists?

- Will they continue to inoculate themselves against their pain and experience and accept violence as normal?
- Will they be the next generation of drug and alcohol abusing parents who beat their spouses, their children and defend their honor by physical might alone?
- Will they continue to believe that the solution lies outside of our cultural values and their own individualistic needs and attitudes?

- Will they as adults fail to address the early warning signs of teasing, bullying, early drug and alcohol use and the availability guns?
- Will the innocence of middle school students be lost forever?