

# The Impact of School Violence on Secondary Victims in Selected Secondary Schools in Trinidad and Tobago

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*Although a wide body of research on school violence exists, much of the work is concentrated within westernized contexts, particularly within the American context and is focused on the types of violent behaviours exhibited, the causes of the behaviour, and solutions to reduce the behaviours. Within the local context, research has identified root causes of school violence and possible solutions. These local studies neither purposely focus on the unmet needs of the secondary victims of school violence nor devise programmes to address the needs of this group of victims. The current paper reports on research that sought to fill this gap and presents findings of the first phase of a study that examined the impact of school violence on students who are secondary victims in two schools in Trinidad and Tobago. The research is situated within the fields of criminology and school improvement.*

## Introduction/Background

*"We have good teachers and we want to learn, but when violence occurs school stops for everyone."*

These were the sentiments expressed by two students who attended a panel discussion held at the School of Education, The University of the West Indies, St. Augustine campus, involving the teachers in the Diploma in Education programme. The students were invited to give their perspectives on what teachers can do to make their experience of schooling more interesting and how they could

improve teaching and learning. The comment expressed by the students represents the voices of secondary victims of violence. They are neither the perceived victims nor the perpetrators. They are the individuals who witness the violence, are within the vicinity where the violence is occurring and who are affected psychologically, socially, emotionally and scholastically (Morall 2011). Yet, much attention is not paid to the needs of this particular group of students within the research literature as it relates to Trinidad and Tobago and the wider Caribbean region. This pilot study intends to begin to fill the gap in this under-researched area in the school violence literature.

The design of the overall pilot study involves two phases, utilizing a mixed methods approach. The first phase was quantitative in nature and employed a survey to answer the first two research questions stated below. The second phase will be utilizing documentary data analysis and focus groups to first gain deeper insights into the data collected in the first phase, and second to answer the third research question. The study straddles both research and developmental objectives, as its goals include finding out the impact of school violence on secondary victims in selected secondary schools as well as engaging students' voices in seeking to find ways to mitigate the negative impacts of school violence on this group.

The current paper reports on the first phase of the pilot which examined the impact of school violence on secondary victims at two levels: that of the classroom and of the school.

### **The research questions**

The study seeks to answer the research questions below.

1. How is school violence impacting on students who are secondary victims at the schools under study?
2. What are the implications of these impacts for academic achievement at the schools under study?
3. How can the negative impact of school violence be mitigated for students who are secondary victims at the schools under study?

## **The Literature: What Do We Know about School Violence and Secondary Victims?**

### **Defining the concepts**

While Dahlberg and Krug (2002) define violence as “the intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against another person or against a group or community that results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation” (p. 1084), school violence refers to any violence which involves school children and occurs on school property, on the way to or from school, during a school-sponsored event or on the way to or from a school-sponsored event (Center for Disease Control [CDC] 2013). The CDC notes that school violence commonly includes bullying, fighting (e.g. punching, slapping, kicking), weapon use, and gang violence. Additionally, violence can be direct—as in the case where the individual is the primary victim, or indirect/secondary—as in the case where the individual witnesses a violent act or is told of a violent occurrence, or is even related to the primary victim. However, the terms direct, primary, or secondary victims have not been regularly used in the review of literature on children’s exposure to violence. In the literature, children are either witnesses to or victims of violence. Both witnesses and victims fall under the umbrella term ‘exposure to violence’ which can also include being told about a violent occurrence.

Generally, a victim is anyone who experiences hardship, injury, or loss as a result of some action or event (Karmen 2013). More specifically, a crime victim can be anyone who suffers hardship, injury or loss as a result of the commission of a crime by another person or institution. Crime victims have been scientifically studied in terms of their financial, physical, and emotional hardships within the discipline victimology. Victimologists have identified two categories of victims; these categories are direct or primary victims, and indirect or secondary victims. According to Karmen (2013) secondary victims “also suffer emotionally or financially but are not immediately involved or physically injured” (p. 2). The term ‘secondary

victims', therefore, encompasses a very wide array of individuals. Morrall (2011) captured this wide array of individuals when he noted that "secondary victimhood usually applies to the families, friends or close associates of primary victims, but can also refer to people who witness crimes or arrive at the scenes of crimes shortly after they were committed, or the professionals who deal with the aftermath of crimes" (p. 16). This study's focus is on the secondary victims of violence in selected secondary schools in Trinidad and Tobago. Although such victims are likely to include teachers and administrative staff, as well as students, this study considers students only.

### **Impacts of school violence**

In *Violence at school: Global issues and interventions* (Ohsako 1997, ed.), the impact of violence was examined in schools in Jordan, Ethiopia, Malaysia, Israel, Slovakia, Colombia, El Salvador, Guatemala, Nicaragua, and Peru. These studies conducted between 1996 and 1997, did not distinguish between primary and secondary victims. However, much of the literature supports the view that violence impacts secondary victims in the same way as primary victims except that secondary victims do not experience physical harm or injury (Morrall 2011; Karmen 2013). As a result the impacts identified in the edited work of Ohsako (1997) should be noted. These studies concluded that violence in schools resulted in innocent children joining gangs, increased corporal punishment by parents and teachers, disrupted family relationships, development of fear and insecurity in children, development of the false idea that violence is a viable method of solving conflicts, weakening of school discipline and a break-down of school rules and regulations, changing schools by pupils, dropping out of school and absenteeism, moving away from home, disruption of the teaching/learning process, and psychological damage to pupils (Ohsako 1997). The consequences or impact of exposure to violence on school-aged children can manifest itself in several ways. There can be psychological effects, behavioural problems, problems with educational

functioning, or a combination of two or more. These impacts are discussed in the following sections.

### *Psychological impacts*

Some of the commonly identified psychological impacts of exposure to violence are post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Margolin and Gordis 2000; Perry 2001; Fitzpatrick and Boldizar 1993), substance abuse (Kilpatrick et al. 1997), antisocial behaviour (Scarpa et al. 2002), aggression (Gorman-Smith and Tolan 1998; Trickett 1993), and anxiety and depression (Gorman-Smith and Tolan 1998). Also, much research has linked exposure to violence with poor emotional development amongst children. Research has also reported an association between exposure to violence and hypersensitivity, lower capacity to empathize with others, difficulty in accurately assessing social cues and an inability to understand complex social roles (Cummings et al. 1994; Dodge, Petit, and Bates 1997).

### *Biological and psychobiological effect*

Hypo-arousal has been found to be an outcome associated with exposure to violence in children (Krenichyn, Saegert, and Evans 2001; Cooley-Quille et al. 2001). In the study by Krenichyn et al. (2001) the researchers found that adolescents who had been exposed to a considerable amount of community violence had a lower resting heart rate than their counterparts who were exposed to less violence. In the study by Cooley-Quille et al. (2001) it was found that a sample of urban high school students who had been exposed to a high level of violence had lower baseline heart rates, when shown a mixture of media violence, than their counterparts who were not exposed to much violence. It can be deduced from these two findings that exposure to violence may have the effect of desensitizing children to acts of violence.

In the same vein as research done by Krenichyn et al. (2001) and Cooley-Quille et al. (2001) other researchers have also reported a link between exposure to violence and hyper-arousal (Wilson et al. 2002; Frost and Stauffer 1987).

### *Educational*

A decline in school attendance, increases in school behaviour problems, and decline in grades have all been associated with exposure to violence (Bowen and Bowen 1999). Also, researchers reported that students who were exposed to violence had lower IQs and reading ability (Delaney-Black et al. 2002). In the study by Bowen and Bowen (1999) school children in 6th to 12th grade were also found to show a decline in school attendance at very basic levels of exposure to community and school violence. In yet another study by Alvarez and Bachman (1997) a national sample of students aged 12 to 19 was used in an attempt to examine the impact that exposure to violence in school can have on students. It was found that school violence increased students' fear of assault at school. This fear of assault might explain the findings by Bowen and Bowen (1999) which is also in line with much of the research on bullying in schools.

In some very interesting research by De Bellis (2001) it was found that exposure to violence can negatively affect cognitive processes, resulting in lower intellectual ability and difficulty with concentration and memory. Research attempting to explain the observed impact of exposure to school violence and exposure to community violence on children, has noted that exposure to violence may lead to more stress. More stress leads to stress-related problems such as poor memory and concentration, sleep disturbance, and intrusive thoughts. All these problems have been associated with poor academic performance (Delaney-Black et al. 2002; Saltzman et al. 2001). It is not surprising therefore, that intervention strategies which treated PTSD in students were associated with improved academic performance in those students (Saltzman et al. 2001). Other research has also looked at the biological consequences of stress since stress can be associated with exposure to violence (Cicchetti and Walker 2001). Here the structural and functional changes in the brain are examined in conjunction with the effect that stress can have on the endocrine and immune systems (De Bellis 2001; Perry 2001).

Notwithstanding these findings it is clear that some students are able to insulate themselves from the outcomes associated with exposure to violence in their homes, communities, and schools (Margolin and Gordis 2000). For example, in a meta-analysis conducted by Kizmann et al. (2003) on the observed impact of domestic violence on children, it was reported that 37 per cent of the children turned out as good as, or better than, children who were not exposed to domestic violence. It is clear, therefore, that not all children respond in the same way when they are exposed to violence. Research attempting to explain this phenomenon has identified a number of factors which tend to increase the resilience of the child. These include the characteristics of the child, parental education (Martinez and Richters 1993), and parental, school, and peer support (Boney-Mccoy and Finkelhor 1995; O'Donnell, Schwab-Stone, and Muyeed 2002).

Intangible factors will influence his adaptation or maladaptation to exposure to violence. Research has also found that children who are able to control their emotions maintain peer relations and process social information and display less negative outcomes of exposure to violence (Kilpatrick et al. 2000; Kliewer et al. 1998). It is therefore arguable that differences in the ability to use coping strategies such as cognitive distraction and behavioural avoidance, have been associated with lower levels of cognitive and behavioural arousal amongst children exposed to violence (Dempsey, Overstreet, and Moely 2000). Additionally, chronic exposure to violence, the occurrence of violent events in close proximity to the child and violent events involving family members, friends or acquaintances of the child, tend to have more devastating effects on children (Martinez and Richters 1993; Pynoos 1993) than in cases where exposure is infrequent, does not take place in close proximity to the child, or involves strangers.

### **The use of theory**

Within this discussion, three theories have been commonly used. The first is **developmental theory**. Research based on this theory seeks to explain how exposure to violence disrupts the develop-

mental process at specific stages of growth and increases the risk of subsequent failure of a later developmental process. Second, **trauma theory** is commonly used. Trauma theory recognizes and focuses on the stress or trauma that children can experience as the result of exposure to violence. Studies such as those conducted by De Bellis (2001) are good examples. Finally, **family systems theory** is often used as the basis for examining the impact of exposure to violence on children. Family systems theory examines the paradox that the family, which should be the primary source of protection for the child, is often the primary source of the violence to which the child is exposed (Margolin 2005). The family systems theory also focuses on the impact that exposure to violence can have on a family's resources. A depletion of family resources can lower the effectiveness of coping mechanisms, resulting in external displays of violence and other negative behavioural problems in children.

#### *Criticisms and suggestions for future research*

Much of the research on this phenomenon has drawn samples from children who are economically disadvantaged, live in urban areas, and who are from ethnic minority groups. It is well known that such children also tend to face challenges with respect to poverty, access to public resources, and access to health care. Furthermore, many of them live in dysfunctional homes. As a result it is more likely that these challenges will produce many developmental, behavioural, and psychological problems in children which could skew findings. However, much of the research has failed to adequately address these biases. As a result, many of the observed effects associated with exposure to violence, may have been influenced by one or more of the other challenges that children face. Margolin (2005) suggests that a comprehensive assessment should be used that accounts for challenges associated with the family, community, and school within each study, rather than looking at these factors separately.

Additionally, much of the research has relied on group comparisons such as exposed children vs. non-exposed children. However such comparisons are unable to uncover how exposure to violence



is affected by frequency, severity, and duration of the exposure. While some research has attempted to address this issue, much work still needs to be done. Moreover, it was noted that much of the research focused on domestic violence, or on community violence, or on school violence. It is unlikely that children suffer from only one of these types of violence. It is more likely the case that children will be exposed to more than one type of violence (Margolin 2005). Thus, the reported results from research which focus on only one type of violence must be interpreted with caution since such results might not be valid.

According to Margolin (2005), there is room for more research which focuses on how exposure to violence is similar to or different from other childhood stressors. Furthermore, he suggests that even though there is some research on how violence affects children, much more research is needed.

Additionally, future research must attempt to overcome the methodological hurdles which prevent the isolation of the unique effects of exposure to violence, over and above the effects that other co-occurring risk factors may have. The researchers who conducted a meta-analysis of some 118 studies on the relationship between exposure to inter-parental violence and child behaviour reported that all of the various studies included in the meta-analysis were remarkable for their overall and consistent failure to focus on the impact of other stressors (Kitzmann et al. 2003). They recommended that researchers develop more complex models such as structural equation modeling, as a way of identifying the unique effects of exposure to violence. They also suggested, in keeping with the suggestion of Margolin (2005), that future research should pay attention to levels of violence to which children are exposed. They recommended that a scale starting with mild aggression (pushing, shoving, slapping) and then moving to more severe forms of violence (stabbing, shooting, or hacking) be used.

## Methodology

### **The process: Navigating rough seas**

The first step in the process involved gaining funding and institutional approvals. These were the calm seas. Initially the researchers wanted to involve more than two schools in the pilot, but funding did not permit. The University of the West Indies Institutional Grant and Research Fund (IGRF) provided funding for the current study. Second, two school principals were approached to participate in the research, one in the educational district of Caroni and the other in the St. George East District. In order to conduct research in schools in Trinidad and Tobago, permission must be given by the Ministry of Education (MOE), which is the central agency responsible for education at the national level. It was at this juncture that the seas became rough. It took more than a year for the Ministry to respond to the application for permission to conduct the research in the schools.

While the team waited on the Ministry's permission the members made contact with the schools and established a relationship. This was done by speaking and meeting with the school principals to explain the nature and purpose of the research and afterwards presenting the research proposal to the staff and gaining useful feedback from both teachers and administrators, which was fed into the research survey instrument. The principals took responsibility for informing parents that the research would be conducted.

### **The sampling procedure**

Both schools in the study are situated in semi-urban areas, are government public schools and are co-educational. Purposive sampling was done to select classes that were not deemed examination classes (example, forms five and six) hence the participants consisted of first to fourth form students. Once the MOE gave permission, the surveys were sent to schools.

## Data collection procedure

A questionnaire was the main data collection instrument. It consisted of a range of question types from multiple choice to Likert-scale type questions. The questionnaires sought to collect data on a range of categories related to school violence and its impact, as well as demographic and other data about the participants. The categories used were:

1. Demographics
2. Academic background
3. Peer network
4. Levels of involvement
5. Occurrence of violence at school level
6. Occurrence of violence at classroom level
7. Perception of school's handling of violence
8. Impact of violence taking place in the school
9. Impact of violence taking place in the classroom
10. Family background

Questionnaires were distributed to all first to fourth form students in both schools. Form teachers within the schools administered them and the responses were returned to the researchers by the schools' principals. The data were analyzed using the SPSS software package to derive both descriptive and statistical results.

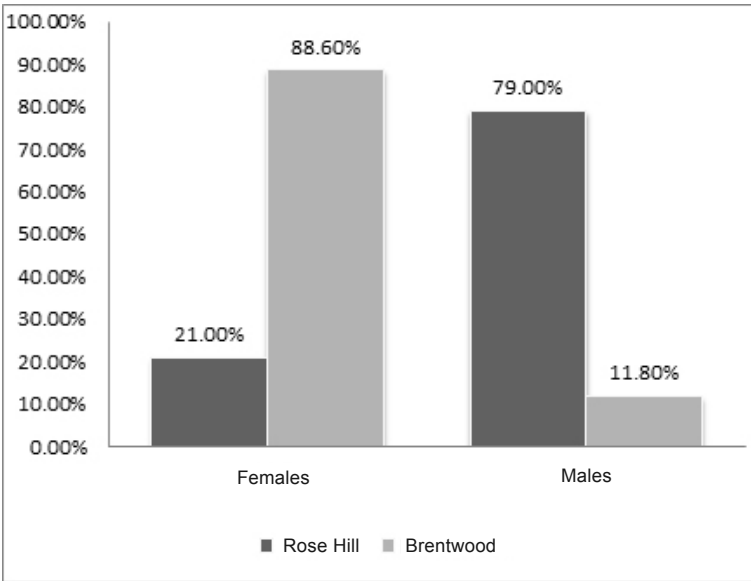
## The Findings

For purposes of this report the pseudonyms Rose Hill High School (RHHS) and Brentwood High School (BHS) were used to identify the schools in the study. The former pseudonym refers to the school situated in the Educational District of Caroni and the latter to the school situated in the St. George East Educational District. The

following report is based on the analysis of responses of participants identified as secondary victims of school violence as defined in the foregoing literature review. As such, the term 'secondary victims' refers to those individuals who were not direct victims of school violence. These participants were identified as those students who answered 'no' to question 17 of the questionnaire, which asked: "Have you ever been a victim of school violence?" The findings show that of the 547 students from RHSS that responded to the questionnaire 75.1 per cent (411) were identified as secondary victims. Of the 614 respondents from BHS, 85 per cent (520) were identified as secondary victims. The researchers acknowledge that the authenticity of students' responses to this question would be based on their own understanding and perception of what it means to be a victim of violence. The findings are presented in sections, which are titled based on categories one to nine from the questionnaire. For the purpose of this paper the findings on the category titled 'family background' were not presented.

## **Demographics**

This section of this questionnaire sought to gather baseline data from the secondary victims. It consisted of five questions which covered the respondents' age, gender, form class assignment, area of residence, and assigned school. In order to adhere to the ethical practices of the study, only data on age, gender, and residence are presented below for both schools. The participants from both schools in the study fell within the age range of 11–17. In terms of gender, RHHS had a significantly larger number of males than females and BHS had a significantly larger number of females (*see figure 1*). What accounts for these disparities is that RHHS was in the process of converting from a mixed gender school to a single-sex male school and BHS was converting to a single-sex female school. This conversion process has since ceased since 2013.



**Figure 1. Gender distribution of secondary victims**

The majority of the participants from RHHS who responded to the question on residence (60.6 per cent) indicated that they live along the East/West Corridor in Trinidad, spanning a radius from Barataria to El Dorado, 39.5 per cent of the respondents from RHHS did not reveal their residence. For BHS 75.5 per cent of the students did not reveal their place of residence, while 24.6 per cent indicated that they live along the East/West Corridor spanning a radius from Barataria to Tacarigua.

**Academic background**

The first question participants were asked in this category was whether they liked school. The findings showed that for both BHS and RHHS 91 per cent liked school and 9 per cent did not like school. At BHS approximately 98 per cent of the total number of secondary victims indicated that their test grades fell within the

range 60–100% and two per cent of the secondary victims' score fell within the range 49 – 0%. At RHHS 78.3 per cent of the secondary victims' test grades fell within the range 50–100% and 21.6 per cent fell within the range 49 – 0%. Students were asked whether they believed that they were doing their best at school. The majority of the respondents from RHHS (61 per cent) did not believe that they were doing their best at school, whereas 39 per cent believed that they were doing their best at school. At BHS 54 per cent of the total number of secondary victims felt that they were doing their best at school and 46 per cent did not believe they were doing their best at school. Participants were asked if their schoolwork was affected when violence erupted at school. Of the 546 secondary victims who responded from BHS, 26 per cent indicated that their schoolwork was affected and 74 per cent stated that their schoolwork was not affected by the eruption of school violence. At RHHS, the majority of the respondents (56.2 per cent) indicated that their schoolwork was affected by the occurrence of violence and 43.8 per cent indicated that their schoolwork was not affected by the occurrence of violence.

These findings indicate that the majority of students like school and based on their responses more of the students at BHS who participated in the study seem to be performing at an average or above average level. Additionally the results show that the students at BHS believe they are more efficacious than those at RHHS. Further the findings show that at RHHS school violence affects more students' schoolwork than at BHS.

### **Peer network**

This section consisted of four questions that sought to evaluate students' peer networks, the forms of associations they made throughout their school life, and whether they or their peers have or are engaged in violence. At BHS the findings show that 20.1 per cent of the secondary victims indicated that they associated with

students who are perpetrators of violence in the school and approximately 80 per cent indicated that they did not. At RHHS 37.3 per cent of the secondary victims indicated that they associated with perpetrators of school violence and 62.7 per cent indicated that they did not. Over 95 per cent of the students from both schools did not think that it was okay to carry out violent acts.

These findings show that the majority of participants in this study have an aversion to violent acts being carried out in school and to associating with those who perpetrate violence. However, it is noteworthy that a larger percentage of students at RHHS associate with students who perpetrate violence than those at BHS, which might suggest that at RHHS more students are involved in school violence than at BHS.

### **Levels of involvement**

The questions in this section were asked to facilitate the researchers' classification of the students who participated in the study into categories of primary victims or secondary victims. Students were asked whether they had ever been victims of violence. The students who answered 'no' were deemed to be secondary victims. Figure 2 shows the findings for both types of victims of violence at both schools. On the left-hand graph a larger percentage (75 per cent) of students at RHHS indicated that they had been victims of violence as compared to BHS where 15 per cent of the sample indicated that they had been victims. The right-hand graph also shows that at BHS more students (83 per cent) are secondary victims, than at RHHS where 25 per cent of the participants are secondary victims.

These findings, coupled with the last comment in the previous section, suggest that more students at RHHS may be involved in school violence, either as perpetrators or victims, than students at BHS.

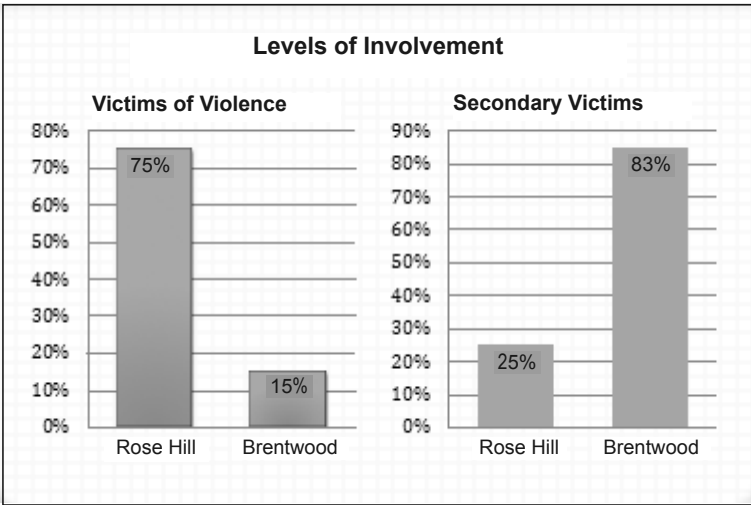


Figure 2. Types of victims of school violence.

### Occurrence of violence at school level

In this study the occurrence of school violence was examined at two levels—at the school level and at the classroom level. The study took cognizance of the fact that there may be differences in the students’ experiences at both levels. Additionally, this category was included because the frequency with which violence occurs can influence its impact on secondary victims. This section reports on the findings at the school level and the next section at the classroom level. The questions sought to find out the frequency with which violence occurred and the types of violent acts that occurred.

The results for BHS showed that the majority of secondary victims (76.2 per cent), indicated that they had witnessed violent incidents at their school about five to ten times, while 24.8 per cent stated that they had witnessed violent incidents more than ten times at their school. At RHHS the results showed that approximately 41 per cent of these victims had witnessed violent incidents five to ten



times and approximately 59 per cent had witnessed violent incidents more than ten times. It is noteworthy, that of this 59 per cent approximately 40 per cent indicated that they had witnessed violence 20 or more times.

Table 1 shows the students' perceptions of the frequency of the occurrence of violence at the school that they may not necessarily have witnessed.

**Table 1**  
**Occurrence of violence at the school level by percentages**

Factor	Frequency	BHS	RHHS
Occurrence of violence at school level	Once per day	9.3	2.5
	>Once per day	14.8	3.3
	Once per week	28.5	17.2
	>Once per week	18.0	11.5
	Once per month	26.0	58.1
	Once per year	3.2	6.1
	Never	0.2	1.3
Total		100.0	100.0

The results of the study show that the types of violence occurring in schools are: bullying, beatings, stabbings, vandalism, obscene language, fighting, 'taxing', and threatening. Some students listed 'drug use' as a type of violence. The researchers were unsure whether the students who indicated the latter meant that they saw drug use as a violent act or whether violence occurred as a result of drug use.

**Occurrence of violence at classroom level**

At RHHS approximately 18 per cent of participants indicated that they had witnessed violence at the classroom level less than ten times and approximately 82 per cent witnessed classroom level violence more than ten times. For BHS approximately 89 per cent of the students indicated that they had witnessed classroom level violence

less than ten times and approximately 10 per cent of the participants had witnessed violence more than ten times in their classroom. The types of violence witnessed by students in their classrooms for both schools were the same as indicated at the school level. Table 2 shows the students perceptions of the frequency of the occurrence of violence that they may not necessarily have witnessed, at the classroom level.

**Table 2**  
**Occurrence of violence at the classroom level by percentages**

Factor	Frequency	BHS	RHHS
Occurrence of violence at classroom level	Once per day	5.3	13.5
	>Once per day	5.3	9.3
	Once per week	10.5	20.0
	>Once per week	5.2	4.7
	Once per month	27.6	29.8
	Once per year	9.9	7.2
	Never	36.2	15.5
Total		100.0	100.0

These findings show that these students believe that they experience violence to a lesser degree at the classroom level as opposed to the school level.

**Perception of school’s handling of violence**

The data gathered in this section sought to examine students’ perceptions of how the school was handling violence. Table 3 shows that the majority of students from both schools indicated that they could rely on staff for assistance when violence erupts. However, at RHHS the majority of students (53 per cent) indicated that they are not satisfied with how the school handles violence; while at BHS the majority (68 per cent) are satisfied with their school’s handling of violence. Similarly, the majority (59 per cent) of students at RHHS indicated that they were uncomfortable reporting incidents of

violence, whereas the majority (51 per cent) of students from BHS indicated that they were comfortable reporting incidents of violence at their school. It is, however, noteworthy that the percentage of students who are comfortable reporting incidents at BHS is almost 50 per cent.

**Table 3**  
**Secondary victims' perception of schools' handling of violence**

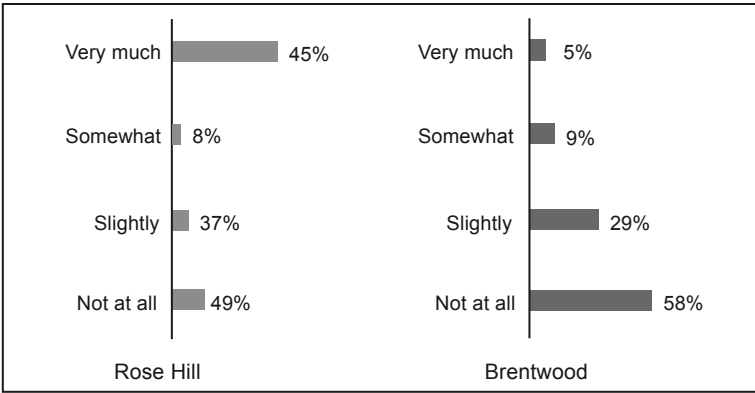
Question	Rose Hill		Brentwood	
	Yes	No	Yes	No
I can rely on staff for assistance	65%	35%	75%	25%
Comfortable reporting incidents	41%	59%	51%	49%
Satisfaction with the school's handling of violence	47%	53%	68%	32%

### **Impact of violence taking place in the school**

This section sought to determine the impact of school violence on secondary victims at the schools. The section comprised a range of questions which elicited information about the extent to which school and classroom violence impacted the students, how the students felt when violence occurred in the school, whether they felt school violence had a negative impact on their schoolwork, what they did when violent acts occurred at school, whether they felt that the acts of violence contributed to loss of teaching time, how often school was disrupted for teachers to deal with the problem of violence, and whether they believed that teachers stay away from school because of violence. (Students were allowed to check more than one response.)

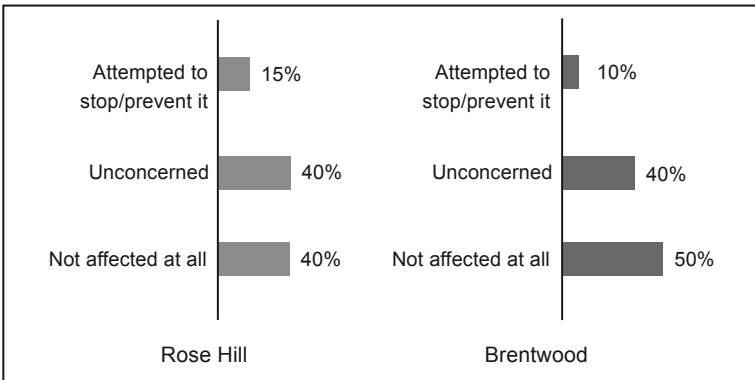
Figure 3 shows the findings from both schools on the extent to which school violence impacted the secondary victims. It is noteworthy that the largest percentage of students—49 per cent from RHHS and 58 per cent from BHS—indicated that they were not affected by school violence. Based on the findings, it seems that the students at RHHS felt more affected by school violence as 53 per

cent indicated that they were very much or somewhat affected as compared with BHS where only 14 per cent of the students indicated that they were very much or somewhat affected.



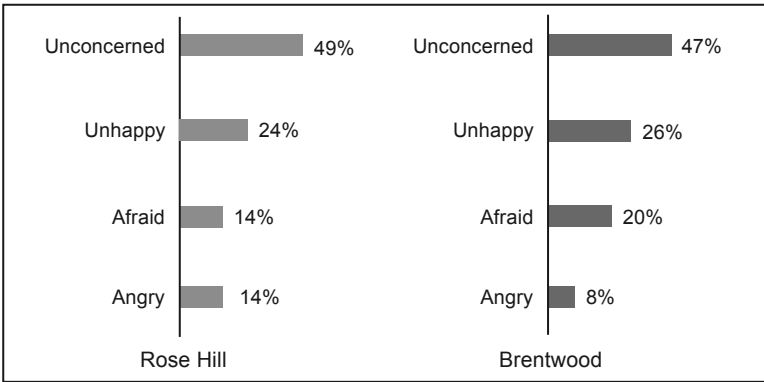
**Figure 3.** The extent to which school violence impacts on secondary victims.

These findings suggest that students may be desensitized to school violence and they may also suggest that there is a higher prevalence of violence at RHHS than at BHS. The data recorded in figure 4 corroborates the point about desensitization as 80 per cent of the students at RHHS and 90 per cent at BHS indicated that they were either unconcerned or unaffected when violence occurred, while 15 per cent at RHHS and 10 per cent at BHS indicated that they would attempt to stop the violence.



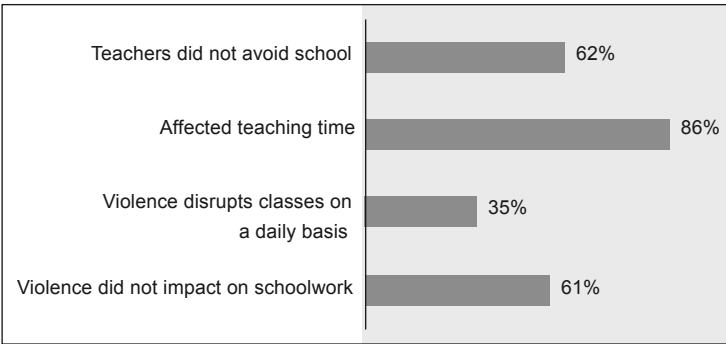
**Figure 4.** Students' responses to the occurrence of school violence.

Figure 5 shows the results of how school violence makes students feel. The findings show that the largest percentage of students from both schools fell in the category: ‘unconcerned’ —49 per cent at RHHS and 47 per cent at BHS. A rather small percentage from both schools felt unhappy about the occurrence of school violence. These findings again bear out the point of desensitization mentioned before.

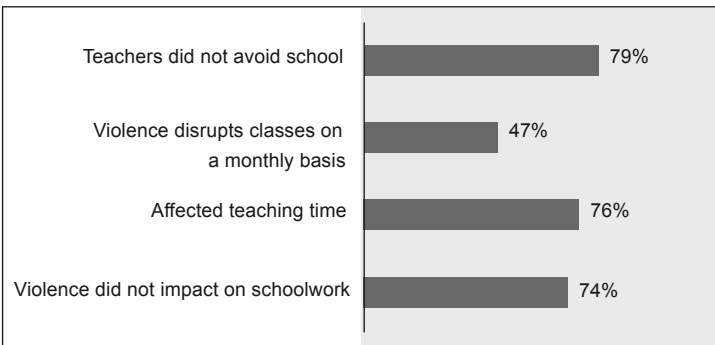


**Figure 5. How school violence makes secondary victims feel.**

A range of questions was asked of the participants to determine whether and how their schoolwork was affected by school violence. Figures 6 and 7 show the results. In figure 6 the majority of students from RHHS (86 per cent) indicated that teaching time was affected by school violence. Nevertheless, 61 per cent of the students indicated that their schoolwork was not affected by school violence. Still, 35 per cent of the students indicated that violence affected classes on a daily basis, yet, 62 per cent indicated that in their opinion, school violence did not cause teachers to avoid classes. Figure 7 shows a similar set of results for BHS, where 76 per cent of the students indicated that teaching time was affected by school violence, 74 per cent indicated that school violence did not affect their schoolwork, while approximately 19 per cent of students indicated that violence disrupted school on a daily basis. The largest percentage (47 per cent) indicated that it disrupted school on a monthly basis, 62 per cent of the students felt that school violence did not cause teachers to avoid classes.



**Figure 6. Impact of school violence on schoolwork at RHHS.**



**Figure 7. Impact of school violence on schoolwork at BHS.**

### **Impact of violence taking place in the classroom**

The study elicited responses from the students to determine the impact of violence at the classroom level. It was interesting that the findings at this level were similar to those at the school level. At both schools the majority of students (54 per cent) for RHHS and approximately 58 per cent for BHS, indicated that they were not at all affected by classroom violence. Similarly a large number of students from both schools, approximately 47 per cent from both RHHS and BHS, indicated that they felt unconcerned about violence at the classroom level. The majority of the BHS students, approximately 70 per cent, indicated that classroom violence did not impact their schoolwork and at RHHS, approximately 51 per cent of the students

indicated that classroom violence did not impact their schoolwork. The majority of students from BHS and RHHS, approximately 75 per cent and 84 per cent respectively, indicated that classroom violence contributes to a loss of teaching time. Among the students from BHS, 37 per cent felt that classroom violence disrupted classes on a monthly basis, while at RHHS 36 per cent felt that classroom violence disrupted classes on a daily basis. As with the results at the school level, the majority of students from both schools, approximately 78 per cent from BHS and 56 per cent from RHHS, indicated that violence did not cause teachers to stay from classes.

## Discussion of Findings

The findings are discussed in relation to the research questions and the literature reviewed for the study. The first section answers the research questions in terms of the findings and the second section discusses the findings in terms of the literature reviewed for the study.

### Answering the research questions (RQ)

**RQ 1:** *How is school violence impacting on students who are secondary victims at the schools under study?*

The study examined the impact of violence at two levels, the classroom and the school. Additionally, it explored factors such as the schools' handling of violence and students' dispositions towards violence which can contribute to the impact that violence, has on secondary victims. Overall, two distinct direct impacts emerged from the findings for both schools.

First, the fact that the majority of secondary victims admit to being unconcerned about violence taking place at both the school and classroom levels, suggests that they are desensitized to violence. Further, based on the findings, it appears that the students at RHHS are more affected by violence at both the classroom and school levels and this suggests that incidents of violence may be more prevalent at that institution than at BHS.

Second, significant majorities from both schools indicated that violence, whether at the school or classroom level, affected teaching time. Yet, for both schools the majority of students neither felt that violence was affecting their schoolwork, nor did they feel that teachers were avoiding classes because of violence. These findings, to some extent, confirm the students' concern that initiated this research, that is, teachers are willing to teach and the students want to learn, but when violence occurs school, and by extension teaching, stops for all students.

At both schools a significant percentage of the students indicated that they were uncomfortable reporting incidents of violence. This is a matter which certainly requires further probing to determine why the students are uncomfortable, because this tendency towards silence can be the result of some psychological impact of violence.

**RQ 2:** *What are the implications of these impacts for academic achievement at the schools under study?*

While the majority of students indicated that their schoolwork was not affected by the occurrence of violence at the classroom and school levels, a similar majority of students indicated that teaching time is disrupted when violence occurs in school. Thus, despite the fact that the majority of secondary victims indicated that their schoolwork was not affected by school and classroom violence it can be inferred that once teaching time is affected, as a corollary schoolwork will be affected. Loss of teaching time means loss of time on task and this can compromise student learning and, by extension, their achievement.

Desensitization, if left unimpeded, can lead to institutionalization and acceptance of school violence as a natural part of the school experience and this environment does not promote learning. Secondary victims may not be aware of the negative psychological impact that their exposure to school violence may be having on them, which in turn may be affecting their academic performance. Thus, while the majority of them believe that they are performing at an average level, they could probably be performing better if they were



not exposed to school violence on a regular basis. The researchers acknowledge that in order to gain deeper understandings of these impacts and their implications on student achievement, further research using documentary data analysis and more qualitative methodological tools may be necessary.

### **Discussion of findings in relation to the literature**

Cummings et al. (1994) and Dodge et al. (1997) both have established an association between continued exposure to violence and reduced capacity to empathize with others. The findings of this current study, which indicates desensitization as one of the impacts of violence on the students at both the classroom and school levels, may suggest that the students have developed a reduced capacity to empathize as a result of their exposure to violence.

Further, the point Margolin and Gordis (2000) make regarding an association between students being able to insulate themselves from the outcomes associated with exposure to violence may have some relevance to this study with regard to the finding that the majority of students do not feel that violence is affecting their schoolwork. It is possible that the secondary victims in this study have become insulated from the violence and this may account for the majority claiming that their schoolwork is unaffected by violence. Arguably, there are a number of factors that can account for such insulation, for example one's ability to control one's emotions, to maintain peer relations, and to process social information (Kilpatrick et al. 2000, Kliwer et al. 1998). Still, it is reasonable to accept that differences in the ability to use coping strategies such as cognitive distraction and behavioural avoidance, may be attributable to lower levels of cognitive and behavioural arousal amongst children exposed to violence (Dempsey, Overstreet, and Moely 2000).

Still, it is unsurprising that the findings currently reported on in this paper did not show impacts of school violence as discussed by Bowen and Bowen (1999) or Alvarez and Bachman (1997), such as behavioural problems in school, decline in grades, and students' fear of assault at school. It is anticipated that the second phase of the

study which involves document analysis and focus groups might reveal more of these types of impacts.

## **Conclusions and Recommendations**

The current paper reported on findings from the first phase of a pilot study which examined the impact of school violence on secondary victims in selected secondary schools in Trinidad. The findings show that desensitization to violence and insulating self against violence may be possible impacts. Additionally, the findings show that the occurrence of school and classroom violence interrupts teaching time. Nevertheless, neither school nor classroom violence seemed to cause teachers to avoid classes. The researchers, however, submit that to confirm this point would require collecting data from the teachers themselves, which is outside the ambit of the current study.

### **Implications of the study**

One implication of this study is that further research is required, for example, documentary analysis, and the use of qualitative data collection tools to gain deeper meaning and understanding of the findings. Another implication is that some testing of students may be necessary to determine the real—separate and apart from the apparent—psychological, biological, and educational impacts that school violence is having on secondary victims in schools in Trinidad and Tobago. This in and of itself implies that the pilot study should be expanded to include more schools in order to get a better picture of the extent and nature of the impacts of violence on secondary victims in schools in Trinidad and Tobago.

### **Recommendations**

The researchers would like to recommend that further research be carried out in this area as indicated in the previous section. In this regard the researchers recommend that a team comprising key stakeholders, for example, officers from the Ministry of Education

and researchers from the University of the West Indies, be established to expand this pilot study to more schools in order to get a comprehensive sense of the nature of the impact of school violence on secondary victims in the country. This would be done with a view to finding ways to minimize any negative impacts on student achievement.

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### **Acknowledgements**

The researchers wish to acknowledge The University of the West Indies Institutional Grant and Research Fund as the funders of this research. The authors also wish to acknowledge the other members of the research team involved in the research project: Brionne Antoine and Enid Butcher.