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THE CODE OF THE SCHOOL: INVESTIGATING THE AGE AT WHICH THE "CODE"  
BEGINS TO INFLUENCE SCHOOL VIOLENCE AMONG STUDENTS

YOO AKAKPO

96 Pages

The school-to-prison pipeline has sparked debate about disciplinary measures among policymakers and school officials. Despite extensive research into student violence, there is little data on the age at which students start using violence in school. This study uses a critical qualitative analysis to determine what age or grade level students understand the importance of fighting, respect, and social status. I conducted the study's research in the Midwest, primarily focusing on students suspended after fighting in Chicago and Bloomington-Normal, Illinois. The Code of the School will be utilized as a theoretical basis to explore this qualitative study of African American students and parents' experiences with fighting and school suspensions. According to this research study, students feel unsafe at school, and the code of the school begins as early as fifth grade or age 10-11. Furthermore, the research concluded that the number of elementary and middle school students suspended has risen in cities of the Midwest in the past few years. This study offers practical recommendations for school administrators, teachers, parents, students, and policymakers.

**KEYWORDS:** the Code of the School (“code”), fighting, parental influence, racial inequalities, respect, school violence, school suspension and social status

THE CODE OF THE SCHOOL: INVESTIGATING THE AGE AT WHICH THE "CODE"  
BEGINS TO INFLUENCE SCHOOL VIOLENCE AMONG STUDENTS

YOO AKAKPO

A Thesis Submitted in Partial  
Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of

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ILLINOIS STATE UNIVERSITY

2023

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THE CODE OF THE SCHOOL: INVESTIGATING THE AGE AT WHICH THE "CODE"  
BEGINS TO INFLUENCE SCHOOL VIOLENCE AMONG STUDENTS

YOO AKAKPO

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## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Despite policymakers' and researchers' efforts to reduce school violence, it has skyrocketed in the media, gaining much public attention. School violence has put the policymakers, school officials, and educators in a quandary about identifying the correct approach to punish students for misbehavior. *School violence* is a multifaceted issue that must be addressed, considering factors such as poverty, mental health, family dynamics, and educational access (Adelman & Taylor, 2002). However, schools have implemented zero-tolerance policies to keep all students in check, irrespective of students' backgrounds or disabilities (Kupchik, 2010). When school disciplinary measures are severe, the relationship between students with behavioral issues and special educators are impacted (Skiba & Peterson, 2000).

In 2010, Kupchik investigated students' experiences with harsh disciplinary policies, such as police officers, surveillance, drug-sniffing dogs, and suspension. He discovered that three high schools in a middle-class, suburban area with less crime, violence, and a good reputation suspended a lot of students. The first high school suspended 26% of its students, the second school 40%, and the third school 43% (Kupchik, 2010). Zero-tolerance policies have been implemented in schools to address a variety of behaviors, including drug use, weapon possession, and violent or threatening behavior. The policies govern school discipline in terms of fighting, gun possession, drug possession, and dress code, and each has its own zero-tolerance policies. Zero-tolerance policies are a type of strict enforcement policies in which a predetermined punishment is prescribed for any violation of a rule or law, regardless of the circumstances (Welch & Payne, 2018). These policies are implemented in several settings, including schools, workplaces, and criminal justice systems. Zero-tolerance disciplinary procedures criminalizes African American students when they use violence to defend themselves

(Henry et al., 2021; Bell, 2019). As a result, African American students must devise a strategy for avoiding school violence and disciplinary measures (Bell, 2021).

Consequently, the *Code of the School* is rooted in students' awareness of their vulnerability to harm. While their schools have metal detectors, guards, and law enforcement officers, these safety measures do not protect African American students hence the lack of protection leads to the formation of the "code". The normative guidelines differ from school to school, but they all set expectations for student behavior, academic performance, and relationships with teachers and other students. The normative guidelines established in schools are essential to maintaining a safe and orderly learning environment (Tenenbaum & Ruck, 2007). The normative guidelines are set of rules, norms, and values that govern school behavior (Reyneke, 2020; Rampa, 2014; Van & Poisson, 2009). These guidelines help set clear boundaries for acceptable behavior and provides a framework for handling misbehavior. In contrast, "the *Code of the School*" is a social norm that rewards those willing to use violence to establish a reputation that deters attacks and earns respect (Bell et al., 2022; Bell, 2019). The "*Code of the School*" is viewed as a deviation from the school's normative guidelines, as the "code" is characterized by fighting, respect, and social status (Bell, 2019).

Fighting in school is heavily criminalized, as students who fight get suspended or expelled. As a result of the constant need for students to defend themselves and reaffirm their reputations, some teachers and administrators disproportionately suspend African American students (Stokes & Davis, 2022; Bell, 2021; Joseph, 2021). Scholars argue that the violent identity of students is borne from the influence of parents who introduce their children to the street code (Bell et al., 2022). The students use inferences from the street code to navigate the school environment which leads to suspension that earns students respect and social status (Bell,

2019). These students adopt a violent persona to avoid being bullied by other students at school. While current studies document "the *Code of the School*," more research is needed to determine the age at which students begin to use violence to deter attacks and gain status at school.

Educators and policymakers must recognize how school zero-tolerance policies target a specific racial group. Scholars argue that educators and policymakers have not examined the social, cultural, ideological, or economic roots of educational norms and accountability policies in schools, perpetuating inequitable student outcomes (Rodriguez & Morrison, 2019; Mateu-Gelabert & Lune, 2007; Mitchell, 2013). Educators and researchers must collaborate to ensure a more equitable and inclusive approach to education. Parents and researchers have emphasized the importance of fiscal equity for inner-city schools (Noguera & Syeed, 2020; Jutras, 2022). According to some scholars, wealthier districts with smaller borders receive more state aid and have higher local revenues (Baker, 2021; McHenry-Sorber & Campbell, 2019). However, resources are insufficient for students in districts where minority students outnumber white students.

In response to the lack of investment in public schools, African American students adopt a violent persona as a reaction to the unsafe school environment (Bell, 2019). These students practice their social norms in the school environment, where students must choose between seeking respect or being bullied in the future (Bell et al., 2022; Flores-Gonzalez, 2002). Students who choose to follow the rules embedded within the *Code of the School* deter attack but invite other students who also view themselves as tough and violent. Students who do not defend themselves are bullied and attacked in the school. They also lose respect from their peers and their chances of being attacked in the future are very high (Bell, 2021; Bell, 2019). Whether a student uses the *Code of the School* influences how a student is treated and perceived, as students

who do not fight back are perceived as weak. However, scholars argue that students who choose the violent identity have difficulty maintaining their identity as they must code switch. When the students are in the presence of teachers and their parents, they pretend to be gentle, but around other students, they behave differently (Bell, 2021; Mateu–Gelabert & Lune 2007).

The *Code of the School* shares some similarities with the street code developed by Anderson (2000), which is used to identify street orientations. Anderson (2000) defines the street code as a set of unwritten rules that govern public behavior, including violence. The rules specify how to "be respected" and respond when challenged, frequently involving threats, violence, and intimidation (Anderson, 2000). This concept helps to explain why specific misbehaviors are common in schools and why most students are forced to develop coping mechanisms to deal with those dangerous behaviors and street values. The street code examines the African Americans in the inner-city's conflict between two value orientations. The community's social backbone is the two orientations, decent and street identity. The residents must deal with their coexistence consequently irrespective of the age group of the individual, children, or adults alike.

Consequently, this environment implies that even children who follow a decent orientation in the neighborhood must comply with the street-oriented climate. These two orientations exist in the school where there are students who conform to the *Code of the School* and students who do not conform to the "code". Scholars believe that street culture has infiltrated some schools due to the failure of school safety measures (Bell, 2019; Sullivan, 2002; Mateu-Gelabert & Lune, 2003).

The poor school safety measures force students to use their newly acquired knowledge to protect themselves and improve their safety, regardless of their commitment to education. Students whose values are consistent with the *Code of the School* must react to their environment.

Consequently, some cultural models argue that student misbehavior proves that they have rejected the norms and values underpinning formal education (Mateu-Gelabert & Lune, 2007). Such models propose that students assert values associated with their class or ethnic backgrounds against school values to undermine the school's efforts to assimilate them.

### **Background of the study**

The school-to-prison pipeline has prompted discussions about how public schools can craft policies to keep young people out of trouble with the law. While schools were once seen as havens for students, data on suspension and expulsion rates show that more and more students are being sent to jail or prison due to minor offenses (Smith, 2015). Consequently, parents are increasingly teaching their children that violence is an acceptable means of self-defense due to a lack of alternatives (Bell, 2021). Meanwhile, students as young as elementary and middle school age are being punished for school violence (Cornell, 2020). Policymakers struggle to deal with these issues, as public schools in disadvantaged communities lack sufficient resources (Mordechay & Terbeck, 2023). Investment in public schools in the inner cities seems to solve the problem (Mordechay & Terbeck, 2023). Furthermore, introducing enough resources to elementary and middle schools would help solve this problem. Investment in public schools would help prevent violence among elementary and middle school students because institutional deprivations have been recorded as one of the causes of the use of violence by students (Bell, 2021). Due to the ineffectiveness of school security measures, some students have resorted to adopting violent personas to feel safe while attending school (Nhambura, 2020; Briggs, 2020; Bell, 2021).

According to this study, institutional deprivation significantly impacts elementary and middle school students' decisions to use violence in school (Bell, 2021). As a result, this study investigates the age at which institutional deprivation influences students' decision to use violence as a form of self-defense. Students' school experiences influence their perception, and their use of subculture provides an alternative explanation for student "misbehavior" and poor academic performance (Bell, 2021; Bell, 2019). However, Ogbu (2002) argued that African American students frequently perceive themselves as victims of discrimination with fewer opportunities than majority members. According to Ogbu, African American students see school as an institution that serves the majority's interests. The study would include parent participants to determine the root cause of the violence and the age at which their children began to use violence in school. This study examines the age or the grade level at which elementary and middle school students use violence. This project will also include student participants who have been suspended for fighting and parents whose children have been suspended for fighting in school.

## **Problem Statement**

Bullying has become predominant in elementary and middle school due to the failure of traditional safety measures. School officials lack discretion in public school disciplinary policies, significantly affecting students of color (Black, 2016). Zero-tolerance disciplinary policies disproportionately affect African American students, and these policies contribute to the school-to-prison pipeline (Berlowitz, 2017). Some students who became victims of the zero-tolerance policies were bullied and only resorted to violence to protect themselves. (Mulvey et al., 2018; Bell et al., 2022). Students resort to violence because when they do not get back at the bully,

other students will classify them as weak, which may lead to future bullying. In some public schools, inadequate resources and teaching tools contribute to the *Code of the School* (Bell, 2016; Scott et al., 2013). The *Code of the School* is a social norm that rewards the willingness to resort to violence to establish a reputation that deters attacks and earns respect (Bell, 2019).

Similarly, research shows that parental involvement in their children's education can also improve the academic well-being of children (Tomás et al., 2020). For example, if a child is subject to mistreatment by a teacher or their peers, it will be simpler for them to express this to their parents. The parents could collaborate with the teachers to prevent the students from being attacked by other students. Parental involvement in children's education can also help teachers and parents work together to identify the best ways to assist students (Borup et al., 2019).

Parental involvement would prevent school officials and teachers from taking the students for granted (Waluyandi et al., 2020). Scholars have documented how lower-income parents cannot participate in their children's education because they must focus on providing shelter and other necessities for their children (Parrott et al., 2022). Another factor that scholars have identified is poor education. Most parents in the inner cities dropped out of school, they are unable to communicate the best policies that should be implemented for their children (Kelty & Wakabayashi, 2020). According to research, most of these parents do not attend PTA meetings, and even if they do, they do not contribute to the recommendations made for their children (Clemensen, 2021). Scholars and policymakers are concerned about violence in elementary and middle schools because high schools were previously thought to be the grade level of school violence.

Consequently, the landscape of school violence has shifted in the twenty-first century (Fedders, 2021). Students are concerned about gaining social status in school, termed the

"violent persona," as early as elementary and middle school age (Bell, 2018). According to researchers, students are increasingly concerned about fighting, verbal bullying, and perceptions of "disrespectful" communication styles because they want to avoid being bullied by other students (Stiehl et al., 2023). Students who adhere to the Code of the School hold their teachers accountable for any instances of disrespect. Students attempt to retaliate against instructors who target them with the "code" because they do not wish to "lose face" in front of their peers, as this would lead to future abuse (Bell et al., 2022). Although some teachers and parents know the code's existence, they do not encourage their students to use it due to the zero-tolerance policy (Li & Hesketh, 2021). According to studies, students use violence to navigate school settings because they don't have an alternative. Researchers emphasize that the communities in which these children live influence their use of violence, while others argue that institutional deprivation reinforces violence (Henry et al., 2021; Bell, 2021). Furthermore, determining the age at which students first use violence would aid in accurately assessing where students first learn about violence.

The school environment is critical in determining the outcome of children's education (Cornell, 2020; Rodger et al., 2020). Children's school experiences can influence their life paths (Baumgarten et al., 2022). Concerns about school violence have led to an increase in disciplinary measures. The school's over-reliance on harsh punishment has increased the school-to-prison pipeline, disproportionately impacting minority students (Bell, 2021). School safety measures' failure primarily affects African American children, making the school environment unpleasant for these students (Bell, 2021). For this reason, African American students must devise a strategy to protect themselves from school violence (Bell, 2021). Accordingly, African American students' constant need to defend themselves and reaffirm their importance, some teachers and

administrators suspend African American students disproportionately (Bell, 2021). Students who use violence to protect themselves face punishment because fighting is becoming more criminalized (Bell, 2019). While current studies document the *Code of the School*, there is more to be explored about the age at which students begin to use violence to deter attacks and gain status at school. This study investigates the age at which elementary and middle school students use violence. This project will also involve parents to determine why their children resort to violence rather than seeking help from the school administration.

### **Significance of the study**

Educators and scholars have worked to reduce the school-to-prison pipeline among public school students. As they developed interventions to reduce the school-to-prison pipeline, they discovered that some student behaviors were considered not only an offense against the school but a crime against the state (McCarter, 2017). Therefore, instead of disciplining students at school, sometimes school officials involve law enforcement officers (Kupchik, 2010). While existing literature demonstrates scholars' contributions to reducing school suspensions, the policy has slightly improved. As Bell (2021) documents the *Code of the School*, he describes it as a product of imported knowledge from the street code and total institutional deprivations within the school setting. Scholars argue that the leading cause of school violence includes a lack of resources in public schools, a disproportionate teacher-to-student ratio, untrustworthy safety measures, and a poor relationship between teachers and students (Bell, 2021).

Another leading factor is a combative relationship in which students are pitted against teachers and law enforcement officers and the absence of social workers and school psychologists in public schools (Bell, 2021). K-12 students are all subject to this policy; hence

identifying the age at which the “code” begins to influence school violence among students would help address school violence.

### **Research Questions and Objectives**

The research questions are: 1) At what age do students begin to use violence as a self-defense mechanism in school? 2) How do parents influence a child’s decision to use violence? The objective of this study is to investigate the age at which the “code” begins to influence school violence among students. The participants in the study included African American children in elementary and middle school who have been suspended or expelled for fighting and parents of children in elementary and middle school who have been suspended for fighting in schools in Bloomington-Normal and Chicago, Illinois. The study interviewed twenty participants and asked semi-structured questions using a Critical qualitative research design. The study would use the *Code of the School* as its theoretical framework.

## CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

### **History of School Violence**

Scholars have documented the various ways in which school policies were altered both before and after the Jim Crow era. African American students have historically faced discriminatory school policies (Kupchik & Henry, 2023). Since the establishment of the American school system, there has been violence and conflict in schools. Furthermore, all public schools in the United States use exclusionary policies to discipline students (Kupchik & Henry, 2023). Even though schools are considered safe havens, certain student behaviors in the classroom are punished to maintain social order in the school. The creation of public schools was seen as a solution to the unrest. Power struggles between teachers and students in the classroom have historically resulted in chaos, control, crime, and punishment in public schools (Fuentes, 2013). Some students have questioned teachers' authority, while others have dared to teach teachers the limits of their authority (Fuentes, 2013). School disciplinary policies arose because of the difficulties that schools face due to the neighborhood's influence on students' behavior. Schools have recently been viewed as a control institution where disruptive student behaviors are channeled into alternative means (Fuentes, 2013). Fears of social disorder and increased crime among immigrants prompted state and district efforts to develop a unified disciplinary policy.

In 1852, Massachusetts passed a compulsory education law intending to reform schools as a precursor to juvenile jails (Nasaw, 1981). This law aimed to help young people who were not in school or working. The law authorized the arrest of people on Boston's streets, particularly immigrants. Scholars link this early form of racial profiling in law enforcement to the targeting of Irish children, where impoverished families were perceived to be a source of social disorder

and crime (Nasaw, 1981). Due to truancy, immigrant children were sent to public school in 1853 (Nasaw, 1981). By the end of the nineteenth century, policymakers implemented mandatory education laws for all youth to maintain social order. School discipline and rules were equally harsh and at odds with the natures of children as forerunners of today's zero-tolerance policies. Officials at the school posted a list of infractions and the penalties that will be imposed. In 1880, police officers patrolled schools and arrested misbehaving students (Nasaw, 1981).

Following WWII, the economy went through another period of inflation, resulting in a social order shift (McCann, 1957). Cities were growing, and suburbs were on the verge of becoming the newest trend in residential development. The 1950s were a time of urban youth gangs and the alienated youth immortalized by James Dean in *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955), despite the veneer of nuclear family normalcy (McCann, 1957). Rising crime rates in New York and other cities have been blamed on "youthful" offenders. Between 1955 and 1956, the police commander in New York reported a more than 30% increase in minor arrests (McCann, 1957). Scholars have blamed youth violence on broken homes, poverty, cultural differences, and media influence (McCann, 1957).

In 1960, the growing immigrant population boosted support for public schools. According to data, social protests such as war, civil rights, student rights, and racism play an important role in the establishment of public schools (Fuentes, 2013). It was increasing residential racial segregation and economic hardship for the urban poor (McCann, 1957). In 1966, racial riots erupted in Watts, Los Angeles, New York, and the following year in Detroit and Newark. These racial riots were mirrored in the classroom (Fuentes, 2013). In 1970, The New York Times published an article regarding racial unrest and instability in the city's schools. According to Weil (1985), racism and violence were pervasive in Washington, DC's public

schools after teachers rejected the initiative where police were brought into the city's schools for the first time in history. "Education cannot be delivered under armed guard," said the teacher union president (Feinberg, 2012).

Currently, in public schools, police officers are on duty due to the recent school shooting and school crimes. School violence is not a new concept or phenomenon; it has existed since public schools were established (Cornell, 2020). According to the findings of twenty-three indicators of school crime and safety, in 2020-2021, there was a ninety-three percent incidence of school shootings with casualties at both public and private elementary and secondary schools (Irvin et al., 2020). Bullying and student discipline concerns with instructors have become increasingly prevalent in recent years. In addition, 16 percent of public-school children reported being bullied in 2019-2020, compared to 8 percent in 2009-2010 (Irvin et al., 2022). At the end of the twentieth century, policymakers saw the criminal justice system as a solution to society's problems, which led to an overreliance on zero-tolerance policies in public schools (Irvin et al., 2022). Policymakers have adopted a punitive approach to separate students of color. Policymakers and politicians have enacted a zero-tolerance policy to expel black students who are perceived as suspects, and schools have been framed as jails.

### **Zero-Tolerance Policies**

Zero-tolerance policies are legal doctrines that call for harsh punishment for specific offenses (Skiba, 2000). The policy aims to safeguard and create a safe environment for elementary and middle school students. Over the last several decades, researchers have studied the relationship between school discipline, zero-tolerance policies, and the school-to-prison pipeline (Skiba, 2000). The Zero-tolerance policies differs from state to state, but the goal

remains to deter crime. Researchers have linked the zero-tolerance policy to the broken window theory, explaining how minor infractions increase violence and crime (Kelling & Wilson, 1982). Sociologists have documented the relationship and foundations of social control theory and broken window theory (Sampson & Raudenbush, 1999; Lanfear et al., 2020). Data shows poor communities' lack of social control fosters a criminal environment (Kelling & Wilson, 1982).

Due to stringent policies such as zero-tolerance, the United States is the only developed nation that imprisons its citizens, primarily people of color (Giroux, 2003). Governor Nelson Rockefeller established the zero-tolerance policy in 1973 in response to the war on drugs. The governor was a driving force behind a shift in New York's drug policies (Drucker, 2002). Under the Rockefeller Drug Laws (RDLs), selling heroin, cocaine, or cannabis can result in a minimum of 15 years to life in prison (Drucker, 2002). However, the zero-tolerance policy's jurisdiction has shifted from the street to the school. Zero-tolerance policies punishes all students' behavior without considering the insignificant circumstances.

Zero-tolerance policies have resulted in severe disciplinary consequences for actions such as bringing cough drops, fingernail clippers, scissors, squirt guns, and pocketknives to school; drawing a picture of a weapon; writing a violent story; and pretending to shoot a gun with one's hands (Nance, 2016). These policies struggle to distinguish between punishment for minor and severe offenses. In 2023, schools continue implementing rigorous standards, though not often using the terminology "zero tolerance." Data show that these policies disproportionately affect African American students with a higher rate of suspension and incarceration than other racial groups (Civil Rights Data Snapshot, 2014; Wu et al., 1982; Children's Defense Fund, 1975). According to research, race significantly influences whether a student is suspended or expelled more than socioeconomic factors (Skiba et al., 2000; Wu et al., 1982). Recent research that

controlled for socioeconomic factors discovered that black males were four times more likely than white males to be suspended for similar offenses (Smith et al., 2023).

The primary reason for instituting Zero Tolerance Policies (ZTPs) in schools was to prevent violence and confusion among students and school officials. Under the ZTPs students who violate school rules face mandatory penalties such as suspension and referral to law enforcement. While Bell (2021) focuses solely on high school students, it is essential to note that ZTPs can be found in elementary and middle school settings across the United States. These students are too young to understand the implications of this policy for their future. As a result of the unwelcoming climate that the ZTPs at school has created, students have been known to engage in violent behavior against one another instead of notifying school officials (Bell, 2021). ZTPs was initially used to control urban violence and drug offenses, but urban public schools have adopted these policies, creating a school-to-prison pipeline that disproportionately affects African American students (Caton, 2012; McNeal & Dunbar, 2010; Rosenbaum, 2012). Instead of disciplining students, the school refers them to the state to receive discipline, leading to ZTPs disproportionately removing African American youth from school and directing them to carceral spaces (Bell, 2021).

### **Evidence or unexpected outcomes of these policies**

The Guns Free Schools Act, passed by the Clinton administration in 1994, stated that students who brought guns to school would be suspended for a year (Skiba & Rausch, 2006). Following the implementation of that rule, school discipline policies were revised to account for desired behaviors like fighting, tardiness, and defiance (Skiba & Rausch, 2006). Metal detectors were installed at schools, and police officers began policing the neighborhood (Kang-Brown et

al., 2013). Data show that these policies disproportionately affect students of color. The zero-tolerance approach, which increased the number of students who dropped out of school, exacerbated the school-to-prison pipeline for black adolescents (Curran, 2016; Smith, 2009; Bradley & Renzulli, 2011). Students of color have been expelled from school because of the excessive criminalization of student behavior caused by these policies (Redfield & Nance, 2016). Due to some police officers' practice of racial profiling, the number of black students expelled from school and admitted into the juvenile court system has also grown (Berlowitz et al., 2017; Cumi et al., 2017). A study indicates that black students are suspended at a significantly higher rate than their white counterparts (Battjes et al., 2023). The report discovered that Black boys are three times more likely than white boys to be suspended. Black girls are four times more likely to be suspended than white girls (Battjes et al., 2023). These inequalities in suspension rates suggest that black kids may be subject to discriminatory disciplinary procedures or unequal classroom treatment. Consequently, the Civil Rights Data Collection (CDCCD) report for the 2017-2018 shows that 44.8% African American students were suspended, White students had 29.3%, Hispanic students had 18.9%, 1.5% American Indians, Asian students had 0.7% and 0.3 Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander (U.S. Department of Education, 2020). These numbers are concerning and suggest that racial and ethnic bias may exist in school discipline policies and practices. Even for similar or less severe offenses, research indicates that students of color, specifically Black students, are disciplined and suspended disproportionately compared to their White peers (U.S. Department of Education, 2020). This can lead to academic disengagement, higher dropout rates, and involvement with the legal system.

In addition, the United States Department of Education and Justice has guided school districts on establishing nondiscriminatory policies and practices (Eskes, 2021). According to

data from the United States Department of Education, black students are more likely than white students to be suspended or expelled from school (Eskes, 2021). Despite ongoing efforts to address the issue, this trend continued in 2022. Implicit bias among educators, harsh disciplinary policies, and a lack of resources for schools in predominantly black communities all contribute to this problem (Bell, 2019).

Furthermore, due to systemic racism and poverty, black students are more likely to experience trauma and stress, which can lead to behavioral issues in the classroom, according to research (Bell, 2021). School suspensions have also increased because of the COVID-19 pandemic. With many schools implementing remote learning and hybrid models, the number of in-person disciplinary incidents has decreased. However, there are concerns that disciplinary actions taken during virtual learning, as well as attendance and technology access policies, may continue to have a disproportionate impact on black students (Mike & Glover, 2021).

### **The street code and the *Code of the School***

The term "street code" was coined by sociologist Elijah Anderson (Anderson, 2000). His study sought to determine why African American men in the inner cities resort to using violence to gain respect and social status. According to his findings, African Americans in the inner cities take personal responsibility for their security without involving the police (Anderson, 2000). As a result, people adhere to the street code to gain respect and social status. He also concluded that many people, particularly African American men, adhere to the code out of necessity rather than as a violation of social norms or devotion to the inner-city lifestyle. However, he claimed others do not follow the code (Anderson, 2000). According to Anderson (2000), adolescents and adults in inner cities, particularly those from low-income communities, follow the street code.

Furthermore, Bell (2019) investigates how students in educational settings use street norms. He investigated how insufficient safety measures contribute to students' use of violence. His research also investigated how institutional deprivation and street code influence students' use of violence when influenced by their parents. He contended that as students become aware of the regulations, their actions and behavior are governed by the "code," and the failure of school safety measures drives students to use violence (Mateu-Gelabert & Lune, 2007; Bell, 2021).

Bell (2021) also investigated how African American students in inner cities neighborhoods deal with a dangerous school environment, education, and suspension. There have been few studies to establish when students start to feel unsafe at school and when they start fighting back. According to data, dissonance in schools and communities where students live makes it difficult for students to pursue educational values and successfully navigate the educational environment (Mateu-Gelabert & Lune, 2007). Furthermore, researchers documented how difficulties cause students to lose interest in the educational process (Mateu-Gelabert & Lune, 2007). As a result, school social climate can significantly impact whether students engage in violent behavior in school (Mateu-Gelabert & Lune, 2007; Bell, 2021). According to Bell (2019), students suspended from school for fighting acquire a reputation for being tough, which gives them a violent reputation. Consequently, most students engage in physical aggression to acquire the violent identity he termed the *Code of the School*. Moreover, he asserted that the *Code of the School* results from institutional deprivation and parental guidance (Bell, 2021).

*Code of the School*, according to Bell, provides insight into the role of parents in influencing their children's school violence (Bell, 2019). Therefore, his research suggests that there are more effective means of disciplining students than school suspension. Bell derived the *Code of the School* from the street code by analyzing how students develop informal rules

governing school interpersonal relationships. The "code" enables students to contribute to or navigate the violent system to pursue similar goals and social status. The *Code of the School* defies the usual safety protocols in public schools. While school administrators and policymakers find it difficult to dissuade students from using the "code" in school settings, students continue to use it.

A paradox is associated with challenging the *Code of the School* as punishment and traditional safety measures. In addition, school administrators and policymakers grapple with dissuading students from using the "code" in school settings, yet students proceed with its usage (Bell, 2019). The *Code of the School* can be replicated across urban and suburban high schools, racial demographics, and social classes. In forming an evaluation comparing *the Inmate Code*, *Street Code*, and the *Code of the School*, one step is missing in the *Code of the School*, restricted social engagement, or residential segregation (Bell et al., 2022). These are held in the *Inmate Code*, depriving individuals of safety measures and sanitary conditions, and *the Street Code*, depriving individuals of racial equality and credible law enforcement (Bell et al., 2022).

## **Racism and Poverty**

According to research, racial disparities in school discipline and the effects of poverty contribute to a social problem (. According to an analysis of national data from 1976 safe schools, students with fathers who worked part-time, they had higher suspension rates than students with full-time fathers (Wu et al., 1982). Most of the African American students had parents who could only work part, and this affected the suspension rate of these students. Bennett and Harris (1982) investigated the potential causes of black parents' and students' perceptions of school suspension and discovered racism in schools. According to one poll, many teachers would

prefer not to live in racially integrated neighborhoods (Bennett & Harris, 1982). Subsequent studies backed up black students' and parents' perceptions, as teachers imposed harsher punishments on black students even when other races engaged in the same problematic behavior (McCadden, 1998), which is consistent with how police arrest black men with the same amount of crack cocaine as their white counterparts.

Furthermore, regardless of socioeconomic status, black students were punished harsher for minor offenses than other racial groups (Skiba et al., 2002). A study of student perceptions of grading found that black students rated school rules and law enforcement significantly lower than their white counterparts. Scholars investigated Black students' perceptions of race and school discipline and discovered that Black students do not feel safe in school due to inadequate safety measures and an inequitable disciplinary system that creates a dangerous environment (Bell, 2021; McNeal & Dunbar, 2010).

Some scholarships have made a point of emphasizing the connection between race and parental involvement. The study found that when parents volunteer at their school, their children are more likely to receive in-school suspension (Marcucci, 2020). According to the scholar, black parents volunteer to assist their children in school because they face challenges in the classroom or the school setting. Bell (2019) probed the views of Black students and parents on the use of out-of-school suspension for violent disputes originating from social issues. According to the findings, black parents oppose out-of-school moratoriums, especially when students are suspended for self-defense. According to the results, black parents know how the school subculture, or "code of the school," operates and support their children's use of violence. Mowen (2017) investigated the impact of school punishment on single black mothers from low-income

families. According to the survey, Black mothers experienced job loss, depression, and lower future expectations for their children.

Although there is research on why black students use violence in school, little is known about the age at which African American students start using violence as a self-defense mechanism. The historical context that shapes race, school violence, and parental influences emphasizes the importance of understanding when children feel unsafe in school and developing protective tools. Teachers in public schools have historically been overwhelmingly white (Puckett et al., 2019). Given the racialized context that shapes K-12 schools and grants privileges to white middle-class norms, school officials frequently pathologize Black parents and parental involvement practices. In contrast, white educators' question black parents' interaction and involvement in their children's education (Allen & White-Smith, 2018).

Furthermore, educators frequently misinterpret Black parents' interactions with their children at school as hostile and neglectful (Allen & White-Smith, 2018). School policies frequently bar Black parents from joining organizing groups, making them feel unwelcome in the classroom. Allen and White-Smith (2018) illustrate. Despite their exclusion from traditional K-12 schools and education organizations, Black parents employ several strategies to assist their children in navigating the school's structural and cultural barriers. According to Bell (2021), parents advise their children to use violence as self-defense in dangerous schools. According to his research findings, most parents have previously attended the school and use self-defense to navigate the school environment (Bell, 2021). As they prepare their children to navigate racism in public schools, black parents teach them positive ideals and how to avoid the dangerous school environment (Allen & White-Smith, 2018). By analyzing the perceptions of black

students and parents, it is critical to understand the age at which students begin to use violence as a self-defense mechanism.

### **The School to Prison Pipeline and Violence**

The school-to-prison pipeline is a complex phenomenon affecting public school students nationwide, including elementary and middle school students. The school-to-prison pipeline refers to practices and policies that drive students out of school and into the criminal justice system, disproportionately impacting African American students and those from low-income families (Bell, 2019). One of the primary ways the school-to-prison pipeline affects students in public schools is the overuse of zero-tolerance policies. Minor infractions, such as speaking back to a teacher, are punishable by suspension or expulsion under these policies. According to research, they frequently applied these policies disproportionately to students of color, who are more likely to be suspended than another racial group of students (Losen & Skiba, 2010). Several academics have studied racial inequality in school settings (Kohli et al., 2017). Gilliam et al. (2016) investigated the role of implicit biases' role in Black school discipline disparities. The findings revealed that Black and White educators were more likely to suspect Black boys of engaging in problematic behavior. Furthermore, Black educators advocated for longer suspensions regardless of the child's race. As a result, irrespective of the racial makeup of the teaching staff, Black students' behavior may be viewed negatively. Another way the school-to-prison pipeline affects students in public schools is the need for more resources and support for students in under-funded schools. Many public schools, particularly those in low-income areas, need more experienced teachers, counselors, and other support staff (Gilliam et al., 2016). This

can result in academic difficulties, higher dropout rates, and a greater likelihood of engaging in criminal activity.

### **Effect of school suspension**

Current research confirms that public schools suspend African American students at an alarmingly high rate. Despite accounting for less than a quarter of the school-age population in the United States, Black students are suspended more than any other racial group (Snyder et al., 2019). Black boys and girls are arrested at four to six times the rate of their white peers (Harris, 2022). According to data, school suspension puts students on a path where they are more likely to drop out, be arrested, and be incarcerated (Garcia, 2022). Bell (2021) interviewed parents and students about their attitudes toward out-of-school suspension. According to the findings, African American parents and students believed that out-of-school suspension violated their core belief in fairness, hampered students' academic achievement, and jeopardized their parents' employment. The study shed light on the idea that for parents and students, going to school and getting good grades was a way out of poverty.

Mendez et al. (2002) discovered a link between school suspension and poor academic performance in Florida in another study. The study found a link between school suspension and poor academic performance. Arcia (2006) examined data from two student cohorts to investigate the relationship between school suspension and academic achievement. The study compared students who received at least one out-of-school suspension to those who did not; the findings revealed that students who received at least one out-of-school suspension were three grade levels behind in reading (Arcia, 2006). Caton (2012) interviewed ten Black males who dropped out of high school due to suspension or expulsion between 2010 and 2011. Throughout the interviews,

participants reported needing to catch up on their classwork and repeating an academic year due to out-of-school suspensions. Perry and Morris (2014) investigated the impact of exclusionary discipline on reading and math achievement in correctional institutions. They discovered that frequent out-of-school breaks harmed students. Morris and Perry (2016) investigated the relationship between academic achievement and school discipline. Out-of-school suspensions were found to be responsible for up to one-fifth of the achievement gap between black and white students. While these studies demonstrate that school discipline harms academic achievement, they do not explain why. Hence, this analysis expands the body of research concerning the age at which the Code impacts student school violence.

### **Parental Influence on the use of violence**

Studies have revealed that parents significantly influence their children's participation in bullying activities in school, as well as their use of violence as a defensive mechanism. According to Olweus (2013), children with permissive or neglectful parenting styles engage in bullying behaviors at school. Because these parents may not set clear boundaries or consequences for their children's behavior, their children may believe they have the right to be aggressive toward their peers. Kochenderfer-Ladd and Skinner (2002) also deduced that parental aggression modeling could have a bearing on their children's utilization of violence as a defensive tool. The study outlined that if parents demonstrate communication skills and compromise to resolve conflicts, their children are more likely to use such strategies to settle disputes peacefully. Children who see their parents use aggression to solve problems or conflicts are more likely to use violence to defend themselves at school.

Studies have indicated that parents' guidance significantly influences children's violent behavior in educational institutions. Davis et al. (2019) suggest that children exposed to domestic violence in their home environment are more likely to use violence to settle disputes in other settings, such as school. The study determined that children who had endured or seen domestic violence were more likely to resort to physical aggression to deal with disagreements with their schoolmates. Additionally, Ruminant's (2022) research revealed that parents who resort to physical discipline, such as spanking or striking, have children who demonstrate violent behavior in school. According to the study, parents who use physical discipline as punishment may be modeling violent behavior to their children, which is then carried over into other settings, such as school.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This research study utilizes the *Code of the School* as its theoretical framework. The term *Code of the School* was derived by Criminologist, Charles Bell (Bell, 2019). He derived the *Code of the School* from the street code, by analyzing how students develop informal rules governing school interpersonal relationships. Bell (2019) investigates how students in educational settings use street norms. He explored how insufficient safety measures contribute to student violence. His research also examined how institutional deprivation and street code through parents influence students' use of violence. He argued that as students become aware of the regulations, their actions and behavior are governed by the "code," and the failure of school safety measures drives students to use violence (Mateu-Gelabert & Lune, 2007; Bell, 2021).

Bell (2021) also studied how African American students in "inner city neighborhoods deal with a dangerous school environment, education, and suspension. Students who follow the

school code prioritize respect, violence, and social status. He emphasized that the importance of social status combined with the "code" put students in a competition for respect, popularity, and toughness, as students build a reputation that protects them in the absence of reliable safety measures. As a result, he concluded that the social hierarchy within a school is influenced by the status gained or lost through fighting. Based on student responses, this social hierarchy may be divided into three groups:

1. High respect, popularity, and toughness
2. Moderate respect, popularity, and toughness
3. Low respect, popularity, and adversity

Students compete in intragroup or intergroup within these three groups. Students in the high-respect group form friendships and compete to determine who dominates the school environment. Additionally, Bell emphasized that students feel obligated to protect their reputation because respect is difficult to earn and easy to lose. As a result, students with high respect, popularity, and toughness may face competition from students with low respect, popularity, and toughness. Students in the group with moderate respect compete primarily intragroup and intergroup against opponents from their social group and lower social groups. Some students in the moderate respect, popularity, and toughness group aspire to a higher social status, which drives them to fight with other students and eventually challenge a student in the high respect group. Students with low respect who defend themselves are more likely to be bullied by popular students. Whether a student wins or loses a fight determines whether he or she moves up or down the social status ladder. The fear of being victimized and the belief that they are unsafe at school are the driving forces behind the social hierarchy among students.

*Code of the School*, according to Bell, provides insight into the role of parents in influencing their children's school violence (Bell, 2018). Therefore, his research suggests that there are more effective means of disciplining students than school suspension. Historical racism has contributed to the use of excessively severe disciplinary measures. Schools have a reputation for being structurally violent, leading to the suspension of African American students. This study's theoretical framework is significant because it allows implicit and racial bias against African American students who use violence in self-defense. The empirical evidence suggests that schools are violent institutions that disproportionately impact minorities.

Henry Giroux and other scholars have documented the concept of schools as structurally violent institutions (Giroux, 2013; Bell, 2018). Giroux argues in his book "Education and the Crisis of Public Values: Challenging the Assault on Teachers, Students, and Public Education" that schools are characterized by overcrowding, unequal resource distribution, and educational systems that reproduce systemic inequality (Giroux, 2013). For example, overcrowding in schools can lead to a lack of individualized attention for students as well as a stressful and hostile environment. Due to unequal resource distribution, some schools may have inadequate facilities, insufficient resources, and underpaid teachers, while others have an abundance of resources and highly qualified educators (Giroux, 2013). This disparity perpetuates the disparity between socioeconomically diverse students' educational opportunities. Moreover, educational systems that rely on standardized testing and rigid curricula can exacerbate systemic inequality. Students from disadvantaged backgrounds may lack equal access to resources and opportunities, perpetuating the cycle of poverty and exclusion. Giroux's analysis demonstrates how schools can be viewed as institutions that perpetuate social inequality through structural violence (Giroux, 2013).

## CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

This study's objective was to determine at what age the “code” begins to influence school violence among students. The participants for the study include African American children in elementary and middle school who have been suspended or expelled for fighting and the parents of children who have been suspended for fighting in Bloomington-Normal, Chicago and Peoria. I conducted twenty interviews and asked semi-structured questions using a qualitative design and the following research questions as my guide.

- 1) When do children first experience bullying at school?
- 2) At what age do children first use violence as self-defense?
- 3) What do parents tell their children who are victims of bullying?

### **Qualitative Method**

In the social sciences and humanities, qualitative research methods, such as semi-structured interviews, are frequently used to investigate complex phenomena and gain a comprehensive understanding of people's experiences, beliefs, and behaviors. Semi-structured interviews rely on a developed set of questions and permit respondents to discuss topics of interest (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). This study used qualitative methodology in semi-structured interviews to explore personal experiences and relationships and enhance comprehension (Denzin, 2008).

In qualitative research, semi-structured interviews are particularly useful because they allow researchers to collect rich, detailed data while exploring unexpected topics. In contrast to structured interviews, semi-structured interviews permit open-ended questions and follow-up

inquiries, which can elicit more nuanced and informative responses. A qualitative approach would shed light on the inner workings of the urban education system and illuminate student and parental perceptions of school violence and self-defense mechanisms by analyzing the vast amounts of qualitative research on African American students' experiences in school.

### **Research Strategy**

According to Kincheloe and McLaren (2011), used Critical qualitative methodology to investigate the intricate relationship between racism and other forms of oppression in contemporary society. This methodology has numerous applications, including but not limited to psychology, sociology, and law. Critical qualitative methodology can be used as a research design to examine the operation of racism social and institutional contexts. Researchers utilizing Critical qualitative methodology can show how race intersects with other forms of oppression, including class, gender, and sexuality, by examining how racial hierarchies are maintained and reproduced. This project was a critical qualitative study that focused on African American elementary and middle school students who had been suspended for fighting, as well as the parents of those students. Bell (2018) used the Critical qualitative methodology in exploring how Black students and parents perceive school discipline, which involve investigating issues of power and inequality. Critical qualitative methodology is a research approach that emphasizes the significance of investigating power dynamics and social inequalities (Denzin, 2017). It frequently entails a focus on understanding marginalized groups' experiences and perspectives, as well as challenging dominant narratives and assumptions (Denzin, 2017).

## **Explanation of the institution**

Normal Illinois has 18 public schools serving 9,950 students in 2023 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023). 94% of K-12 students in Normal, IL, are educated by the public school system. Bloomington, Illinois, has 19 public schools serving 8,144 students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023). The public schools in Bloomington, Illinois, educate 82% of all K-12 students. Chicago Public Schools (CPS) reported overseeing 638 schools for the 2020 school year, including 476 elementary and 162 high schools, 513 district-run schools, 115 charter schools, nine contract schools, and 1 SAFE school. The district has 340,658 students enrolled. Unless they attend a selective enrollment school, CPS students attend the nearest school to their residence. CPS has reported the school year of 2019-2020 to have a student-teacher ratio of 15.84. In the 2020-21 school year, 46.7% of CPS students were Latino, and 35.8% were black. 63.8 percent of the student population was from low-income families, and 18.6 percent were English-language learner (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023).

## **Sampling**

The study collected sample population via in-person recruitment. I used face-to-face recruitment because I was unfamiliar with the participants, and when they met the criteria, I recruited them immediately. Face-to-face recruitment is common in qualitative studies because it allows researchers to establish rapport with potential participants and learn more about their experiences and perspectives through in-depth interactions (Mason, 2017). According to Mason (2018), the researcher and participant can build trust and openness through in-person recruitment, resulting in more nuanced findings. For example, Davies et al. (2020) used face-to-face recruitment to find and approach potential participants for a qualitative study exploring

people's perceptions of and coping with chronic pain. Face-to-face recruitment was essential for eliciting in-depth and insightful accounts of participant experiences, as it allowed the researchers to establish rapport with the participants. I also recruited through social media via LinkedIn, Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram posts. I used snowball sampling as well. According to Dattalo (2008), snowball sampling draws samples from a network and recruit participants when they are difficult to find.

In qualitative research, snowball sampling is frequently used to find and recruit participants who share a common experience or set of circumstances (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981). Beneficial for inaccessible populations, such as those lacking a sampling frame (Guest et al., 2012). With snowball sampling, researchers can recruit individuals otherwise excluded from a study. Guest et al. (2012) explain that snowball sampling helps researchers establish social connections and identify key informants with in-depth knowledge of a topic. Researchers used snowball sampling to identify and recruit individuals with direct caregiving experience and key informants, such as medical professionals and support group facilitators.

## **Recruitment**

I gave each participant a recruitment flyer so they could distribute it to others interested in the study. The recruitment flyer contained the following:

- A brief description of the study.
- The criteria for participants.
- Information that each participant would receive a \$25 gift card upon completion of the research.

Each potential student participant was specifically asked if they were suspended for fighting before recruited for the study and each parent participant were specifically asked if their child had been suspended for fighting. Interviews were conducted with nine African American students and one Filipino student. Interviews were conducted with ten African American elementary and middle school students and Nine African American parents for twenty participants. One parent participant had international roots. This study included an equal number of male and female participants. Seven students were recruited from a Chicago Public School, while the remaining three were recruited and Bloomington-Normal, Illinois. The student claimed that they were expelled for defending themselves. Six mothers and four fathers were present among the parents. The three parent participants were recruited from Chicago, and the six parent participants were recruited from Bloomington-Normal and one from Peoria. The criterion for sampling did not include children to match with their parents for the interview. When the child and parents wanted to participate in the study, both were interviewed separately. In the case where both parents were interested in the study, both were interviewed separately.

**Table 1: Demographics of Student Participants**

Name (Pseudonym)	Gender	Year	Number of Suspensions	City
Elena	Female	Middle school	3	Chicago
Randy	Male	Middle school	2	Bloomington
Hannah	Female	Middle school	1	Bloomington
Myles	Male	High school	5	Chicago
Lydia	Female	Middle school	1	Chicago
Micah	Male	High school	3	Normal
Skai	Male	Middle school	3	Chicago
Brayden	Male	Middle school	2	Chicago
Anna	Female	Elementary	1	Chicago
Angela	Female	Elementary	2	Chicago

**Table 2: Demographics of Parent Participants**

Parent Participant Table:				
Name (Pseudonym)	Gender	Child's Year	Number of Suspensions (according to their children)	City
Mama Gee	Female	Middle School	4 (for each of her children)	Peoria
Mama Vera	Female	Middle School	2	Bloomington
Mama Joy	Female	Elementary	1	Normal
Papa Jay	Male	Elementary	2	Bloomington
Mama Jane	Female	Middle School	2	Bloomington
Mama Esther	Female	Middle School	3	Bloomington
Mama Lily	Female	Middle School	1	Bloomington
Papa David	Male	Elementary School	1	Bloomington
Mama Edna	Female	Middle school	3	Chicago
Papa Danovo	Male	Middle school	3	Chicago

## **Data collection and analysis**

Each student and parent participant were asked a series of questions involving semi structured interview regarding the age at students' use violence as a self-defense mechanism and the age at which students first get bullied in school. Additionally, to protect the confidentiality of each participant, pseudonyms were used throughout the study. There were two student-parent matched pairs. Student and parent participants were interviewed separately. Interviews lasted 30-45 minutes considering the age of the students. Student and parent interview responses were recorded, transcribed, and open and focused coded manually for emerging themes. I anonymized, encrypted, and restricted access to the data. I obtained a verbal informed consent before recording each participant which I assured the participants that I will destroy after the analysis. I discussed the participants' involvement in the research, the purpose of the research study, risks and benefits, the voluntary nature of the research, their rights to cease their involvement at any time, and the procedures used to protect their confidentiality (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). I recorded and transcribed the interviews in their entirety to capture every detail. I asked each participant twenty-four semi-structured questions to obtain insight into their knowledge of school safety and school violence. Each student participant interview questions were designed carefully to explore the age at which students get bullied in school and the age at which they begin to use violence as a self-defense mechanism in the following areas: a) failure of traditional school safety measures b) the school setting c) reliance on peer networks d) role of the neighborhood e) the role of parents in the code's adoption f) poor relationship between law enforcement and students. Parents were interviewed separately and were asked twenty-seven semi-structured questions to obtain insight into their view on the age at children begin to use violence as self-defense mechanism in school.

The parent interview questions were carefully designed to capture the following areas: a) failure of traditional school safety measures b) the school setting c) perception of neighborhood safety d) reliance on peer networks e) The role of parents in the code's adoption f) Poor relationship between law enforcement and students.

In this study, “failure of the traditional school safety measures is considered a significant problem. Potential dangers such as acts of violence and accidents may go unabated because the safety measures are either insufficient, poorly implemented, or ineffective. It is important to explore the poor safety measures because when school safety measures fail, it can lead to injury, death, trauma, a loss of faith in schools' ability to protect students and staff and most importantly the school to prison pipeline. In the current study, the term "school setting" refers to any location where formal education is provided. The educational infrastructure includes everything from schools and classrooms to teaching tools and materials, course plans, school bus and administrative personnel.

A typical school divides students into different classes based on their grade level, and each class has a teacher whose job it is to instruct the students in that class as well as monitor their academic progress. This study looked at the elementary and middle school settings. Language arts, mathematics, science, social studies, and even physical education may all be included on the list of required courses. Students can participate in activities outside of the classroom at their schools, such as sports, clubs, and organizations. A variety of protocols are in place in schools to protect the well-being of both students and teachers. This category may include discipline policies, emergency plans, and other similar documents.

“Reliance on peer networks” explores how children who strive to evade bullying at school employ peer networks. Bullies may target children perceived as unusual or defenseless, and

obtaining social support can help them feel more secure and welcomed. Children can rely on their peer networks when they form close friendships with people who share their interests and values. These friendships can offer a sense of belonging and security and opportunities for positive social interactions and mutual support. Another strategy that children can use to avoid bullies is to stay in groups or to find areas of the school where they feel safe and secure. This includes sitting with friends at lunch or recess or taking the same route to and from school daily. The “role of the neighborhood” looks how the environment in which children grow up can significantly influence their use of violence at school. Kids raised in communities plagued by criminality and deprivation are more prone to be exposed to aggression, which can lead to the acceptance of violence as a mechanism of managing disputes.

The study explores how children who witness violence or trauma in their homes or communities are more likely to engage in violent behavior. Violence can also harm children's mental health and emotional well-being, resulting in increased aggression and difficulty regulating emotions. Furthermore, in communities lacking resources and support, such as high-quality schools, mental health services, and after-school programs, children may feel disconnected and deprived of positive social and emotional development opportunities. Their experiences may lead to depression and a disregard for the consequences of violent behavior. The “role of parents in the code's adoption” examines how parents can significantly influence how quickly students embrace the street code by promoting or challenging its values and customs. Parents who grew up in the same neighborhood and are exposed to the street code may unintentionally perpetuate its goals and norms by modeling such actions or failing to intervene against its drawbacks. It can also mean prioritizing peer loyalty over ideals like academic success or deference to authority, celebrating drug use or other criminal activity, and using violence to settle conflicts.

The “Poor relationship between law enforcement and students” explores when students sense they have been treated unequally or oppressed by law enforcement, they may cultivate a feeling of animosity or skepticism towards authority figures. As a result, law enforcement may be less cooperative, and criminal activity or violent behavior may increase as a form of defense or retaliation. Each interview was conducted in a setting that was quiet, free from interruptions, and of the participant’s choosing to maximize comfortability. I asked interviewees to place their phones on silent for the interview. Upon completion of each interview, I gave the participants \$25. I recorded each interview and placed it on digital drive for storage purposes. Spare batteries, digital storage drives, and a backup recorder were always available to protect against equipment failure. Immediately after each interview I listened to the recording and transcribed it.

### **Data Analysis Procedures**

I manually transcribed the data to analyze the data obtained from the semi-structured interviews. I manually transcribed the data because the software did not transcribe exactly what the participants were saying. Semi-structured qualitative interviews will provide insight into how the students feel about the school environment and when students begin to use violence as a self-defense in school. While previous studies explored the reasons why students use violence in school, the current study also explored the age at which the “code” begins to influence school violence among students. Each interview lasted 30-45 minutes and responses were open and focused coded for emerging themes. Open coding consists of studying every segment of the interview, summarizing what was stated, and labeling it with an appropriate code (Boeije, 2002). According to Saldana (2014) codes in qualitative research are most often a word or phrase that assigns an overall meaning to a segment of written or visual data. I selected open coding because

research shows this technique helps construct a detailed conceptual data model from which categories and themes can emerge (Saldana 2014). After the initial coding process was complete, I used focused coding. Saldana (2014) argued focused coding consists of searching for the most frequent or important codes to develop the most frequent or important codes to develop the most relevant categories and determine which initial codes best describe the data. Focused coding is defined as a method that constructs categories without attributing attention to their properties or dimensions. Glaser (1974) states that data should not be forced to fit pre-existing categories or discarded because it does not fit a specific theory. It is important that categories emerge directly from data and highlight the voices of the participants. The selected coding methods ensured the participants' voices were represented in a standardized manner.

In addition to coding the interviews memos were also included in the data analysis process. According to Saldana (2014), memos are sites of conversation with us in references to our participants, phenomenon, or the research process. They promote reflexivity in the research process by encouraging critical thinking in relation to the research topic, how the research is being conducted, and challenging your own assumptions. Saldana (2014) also states the purpose of analytic memo writing is transcribe and reflect on the construction of codes, the emergence of themes, and how it leads to theory generation. Since researchers can become absorbed into the research process, they should document the events to reflect upon later. Additionally, Miles and Huberman (1984) argue that memos should be dated to help the researcher reflect upon them with an exact date in mind. I recorded information in relation to setting, time, date, and relevant information regarding the research process as memos. After coding, fifteen themes emerged from the interviews.

**Table 3: Emerging Themes**

Failure of the traditional school safety measures	School disciplinary measures
Self defense	Bullying
Reliance on peer networks	Social Media
Role of parents in the code's adoption	Parental intervention
Poor relationship between law enforcement and students	Teacher intervention
Poor relationship between school officials and students	Race
Physical altercation	Social Status
Violence	

After coding the interviews and memos the following themes emerged from the data: role of parents in the code's adoption, parental intervention, poor relationship between law enforcement and students, race, social status, social media, bullying, school disciplinary measures violence, poor relationship between school officials, physical altercation, teacher intervention, parental intervention and self-defense. The “role of parents in the code's adoption” in the study is defined as how parents teach their children at the street code consciously or unconsciously. The poor relationship between teachers and students looks at how lack of diversity teachers makes it difficult for students to connect with teachers in the school. The poor relationship between law enforcement and students looks at how the fear of law enforcement losing their job by being too hard on

students, makes them ignore black students when they are engaging in violence. “Physical altercation” is defined as school officials ignoring students who verbally bully their students but react when there are physical fights. Social media is defined as the online medium by which students bully each other. Poor relationship between school officials and students implies no effective dialogue, understanding, trust, and consideration between the two parties. This can be evidenced by students feeling neglected or disregarded by school officials, school authorities seen as unapproachable or unaccommodating, or an overall ambience of strain or antagonism between the two assemblages.

Several studies highlight potential ethical dilemmas that coincide with qualitative research. Patton (2002) states that respondents are beginning to challenge their research confidentiality rights particularly when telling their story. This serves as a mechanism of empowerment or a substance for social change. Considering the nature of this study and its potential to serve as a catalyst for education reform, I thought respondents may have considered challenging their confidentiality rights. However, this did not occur therefore it was not an issue in this study.

As an African woman, I believe it was important to consider how race may affect the study. Scholars argue that a common culture between interviewers and interviewees provides a rich opportunity to gain access to a population, establish rapport, and propose meaningful questions that explore a social phenomenon (Temple & Edwards, 2002). The only barrier to the interview process was my African accent, as I had to repeat the questions to the interviewees. However, scholars argue that outsiders, researchers who study a group to which they do not belong, have a greater sense of objectivity and are more likely to seek clarity in participants’ responses (Fonow

and Cook, 1991). Therefore, researchers should not presume to understand the meaning of the interviewee's responses because of race and language.

## CHAPTER IV: DATA ANALYSIS

Numerous institutions, including the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and the Children's Defense Fund (CDF), have voiced grave concerns about the use of school discipline in black school-aged populations (Fancher, 2009; Children's Defense Fund, 1975). Considering the increased focus on school violence in recent years, it would be prudent for researchers to investigate the primary reasons why students resort to violence against one another.

Understanding the perspectives of parents would also aid in determining how policymakers can address this issue without resorting to harsh disciplinary measures against students, which would ultimately harm students, teachers, and parents. This thesis focused on examining the age at which students begin to use violence as a self-defense mechanism in elementary and middle school in Normal, Bloomington, Peoria and Chicago, and the study analyzed the perception of parents whose children have been suspended for fighting in school from Normal, Bloomington, Peoria and Chicago, IL. In this chapter, I asked: a) At what age do children get bullied in school? b) At what age do children understand the need to use violence to defend themselves in school c) How do parents advise their children to respond when they are bullied at school?

After conducting twenty in-depth interviews with participants in Normal, Bloomington, Peoria and Chicago, my findings suggest that school officials are the leading cause of violence in school. The study indicated that students were victims of bullying on the school bus. Despite this, there was no school staff on the bus to ensure the students' security when mistreated. School officials do not treat African American students' grievances with the appropriate amount of seriousness. School authorities only intervene when physical altercations lead students to adhere to the School Code for protection. The majority of students were reluctant to recount their

experiences with bullying, as it brought back unpleasant memories and exposed their defensive strategies, which could result in repercussions from their schools.

### **Failure of the traditional school safety measures**

The findings in this chapter are consistent with previous research that highlights the influence of the street code in the school and the adoption of the *Code of the School* as a self-defense mechanism by students. In the initial stages of the interview, I asked the participants several questions to explore the age at which students begin to use violence as a self-defense mechanism in school. Ten of the student participants expressed that there were poor school safety measures that needed to be improved. Eight of the parent participants also believed there were poor school safety measures. Eight of the student participants stated that using violence was a way of increasing their social standing in school. When students' responses were compared across gender, age, and grade level, there were no differences in their reactions concerning using the *Code of the School*.

Mama Gee is a mother of middle school children (male and female) who received four suspensions each. She presented as an enthusiastic participant. She explained with enlivened joy where she sees her children in 5 years, but she is saddened by the zero-tolerance policies which affect the academic progress of her children. What breaks her heart most is that her daughter was suspended for defending herself. Mama Gee expressed bitterness about how the failure of the school safety measures almost led her daughter to join a girls' gang in the school. Mama Gee also stated that the school once gave her preferential treatment because her husband was a police officer. She said she had told the school authorities that is not fair and that the school rules state that students should be suspended for fighting, and if her daughter was fighting, she must also be

suspended. Mama Gee also included how her son was only trying to settle a fight between two students, but he ended up getting suspended.

Interviewer: How do you feel about the school safety measures?

Mama Gee: The school is doing a good job, but the zero-tolerance policy is causing the problem. My baby, daughter has been suspended for fighting back. I've had teachers come to me to talk to me and let me know my children may be having problems. You know sometimes they may tell you things in confidence that you don't know that your child might be having problem which is not the child's fault.

**{Mama Gee, Middle school students' mother, Suspension 4 each, Peoria}**

Immediately after asking how she felt about the school safety measures I asked her to explain how she thinks the school safety measures can be improved

Interviewer: How do you think the school safety measure can be improved?

Mama Gee: When they remove zero tolerance policy

Interviewer: What other ways do you think the school safety measures can be improved?

Mama Gee: it is also instructors and counselors; I mean it all goes together as a team and if everybody is not working and you get some teachers if they look at you and just do the assignment and that

**{Mama Gee, Middle school students' mother, Suspension 4 each, Peoria}**

Mama Gee's statement suggests how the certain situations, zero-tolerance policies over-emphasize slight offenses, like minor disturbances in the classroom. This can divert attention and resources from serious safety concerns like bullying or violent threats. In her situation, the zero-tolerance policy was rigid, allowing little discretion or consideration of her daughter's circumstances. This can have unintended consequences, such as punishing students who are victims of bullying or harassment. Zero-tolerance policies may place too much emphasis on punishment and not enough on prevention. Schools, for example, may need to address the root causes of such behavior, such as mental health issues or access to firearms, rather than punishing students who engage in fighting. While zero-tolerance policies may appear to be a simple way to

maintain school safety, it is critical that elementary and middle schools ensure that it is implemented in a way that is effective and appropriate for the school and its students. Mama Gee's statement shows that some parents are not in support of the rigidity of the Zero-Tolerance policies in schools, but it is still implemented in public schools.

Similar, the statement of Elena proved how the failure of the school safety measures led to her suspension. Elena stated clearly that if the teacher had intervened when she was bullied verbally, she would not have used physical violence. She asserts that the teacher did intervene later after she had stabbed the boy.

Interviewer: How do you feel about the school safety measures?

Elena: Let me tell you a story, I first moved to a predominately white neighborhood. My mom was divorced. A girl who would tease me and I got a missing assignment slip so anytime a student does their homework they get a slip, and they have to get the parents signature to acknowledge that they didn't do it for the child. So, I had left the slip on the desk and so he kept reaching for it and then I had my pencil in my hand and I ended up stabbing him in the hand. It wasn't intentional because he was trying to grab, the teacher wasn't doing anything you know how many times I got into these situations. So, it was in second grade where I have my grandma sewing needle from her house. I don't even recollect why I grabbed sewing needle, but I brought it to school you know you're not allowed to bring weapons to school, and I ended up stabbing a boy because he was teasing me, and the teacher did nothing.

**{Elena, Middle school student, suspension 3, Chicago}**

Elena's statement suggests that teachers who only respond to physical altercations were waiting for a problem to occur before acting, rather than working to prevent problems from occurring in the first place. Also, the statement emphasizes that teachers who only respond to physical altercations may be unaware of other issues concerning school safety, such as bullying, harassment, or substance abuse. By failing to address these issues, they endanger students. In addition, teachers may lack the necessary training and resources to address classroom safety concerns. If they have not received adequate training, they may be unable to recognize and address safety concerns in a timely and appropriate manner. Furthermore, teachers who only

respond to physical altercations may use punishment excessively to address safety concerns. While punishment is sometimes necessary, it should not be the primary focus of school safety measures. Counseling, mediation, and conflict resolution can all help to keep a safe and healthy learning environment. Elena's statement suggests that teachers must take a proactive approach to school safety, addressing physical altercations and other safety concerns as they arise. In addition, a commitment to providing a safe and supportive learning environment for all students, as well as adequate training and resources.

When I asked how she feels about the school safety measures, she said she does not feel protected which is line with how Mama Gee feels like about the school safety measures

Interview: How do you feel about your school environment?

Elena: I do not always feel protected like, from a verbal and physical standpoint.

**{Elena, Middle school student, suspension 3, Chicago}**

Elena and Mama Gee's statements describe how the students are left to protect themselves and the school disciplinary policies can be overly harsh and unfairly punish students who defend themselves or are bullied. Due to Elena and Mama Gee's experiences, they may be concerned that the guidelines will result in disproportionate punishment for minor offenses because they do not consider each incident's unique circumstances. Mama Gee statements suggests that zero-tolerance policies ignore the underlying causes of fighting, such as bullying, mental health issues, or a lack of conflict resolution skills.

African American parents and students believe that to provide a safe and supportive environment for all students; schools must do more to address these underlying issues. Although Elena's behavior necessitated a punishment, there is no doubt that the teacher's reactivity led to her stabbing the student. While zero-tolerance policies are a necessary step in maintaining school

safety, schools must ensure that they are implemented fairly and appropriately, considering all stakeholders' needs and concerns.

Mama Vera, a middle school mother who lives in Bloomington shares her grievance on how the school safety measures are not fair to students of color.

Interviewer: How do you feel about the school safety

Mama Vera: My son got bullied on the school bus. School officials are not fair to kids of color. Just be fair all the way around it, because you have rich and white kids in the school. I just have a strong issue with that. You have only one black person on the board. We are not being represented. They have been getting away with that and they act like that is the protocol. If you feel the quarter, that's all. For over 7 years, there has not been diversity in the educators. It felt as though, the superintendent is responsible for this. She will keep deferring the answer. We lack the trust of the community. It is just to make people shut up.

**{Mama Vera, mother of Middle School student, Bloomington}**

Like Mama Gee and Elena, the statement of Mama Vera provides illumination on what African American students face and their disconnection with school officials due to the lack of diversity on the board and school officials. This makes it difficult for students to report issues to teachers because the students and parents do not feel represented. My findings, backed by data, show that school zero-tolerance policies significantly affect students of color, particularly Black students (Bell, 2021). This is a result of discriminatory implementation, over-surveillance, subconscious bias, and a dearth of resources in schools with large minority populations (Skiba et al., 2011). According to one study, black students were more likely than white students to be suspended or expelled for the same behavior (Van Dyke et al., 2022). Furthermore, Scholars found that black girls were disciplined disproportionately for behavior that was not considered a violation for white girls, such as "talking back" or "disrespect" (Wun, 2016). These findings highlight the importance of schools addressing potential inequities in disciplinary practices and

ensuring that all students are treated fairly and equitably. In addition, there is a need for diversifying the school board so that parents and students of color will feel represented. Mama Vera also stated that her son was bullied on the bus which is also considered a school environment. Hence, the school can instruct bus drivers to recognize and act against bullying behavior. Additionally, schools can guide bus drivers on how to report incidents to the school administration. Furthermore, when parents are distressed because other students bullied their children on the school bus, it can significantly impact the school and the surrounding community. Therefore, schools can also increase adult supervision on the bus to monitor student behavior and intervene to prevent bullying incidents. Consequently, public schools can communicate with parents about the steps they are taking to prevent bullying and provide updates on any incidents that occur. Schools must take parents' concerns seriously and work with them to address them.

### **Reliance on peer networks**

One theme that emerge from the study is the reliance on peer networks which a majority of students resulted to because of the ineffectiveness of the school safety measures. The themes are interconnected as one theme leads to the other. Six of the student participants discussed their need to rely on a friend and two student participants discussed their need to rely on their siblings who were in the same school as them. The following participants provided a vivid example of how relying on a peer network helped them escape bullying in school. Three students expressed their need to rely on their friends for support against bullies and how that prevented them from being targeted by the bullies. One student participant explained how he was bullied when his friends were not around to support him.

Upon interviewing Randy, a middle school student who stated that he was not bullied because his friends provided him support.

Interviewer: Do you feel your friends protected you from bullies?

Randy: Yes, my friends they got my back. I said I have not been bullied before, because my friends protected me if I have any issue.

**{Randy, Middle school student, 2 suspensions, Bloomington}**

Randy's statement suggests that he could have been bullied if he did not have friends or if he did not have friends who had his back. This shows how some students end up getting bullied because they did not have anybody to protect them from the bully. As such, when the student is bullied and the student tries to fight back, that student get suspended because the teacher or the school authorities may not know what triggered the fight. The suspension later earns the student respect, popularity, and social status among their peers. Comparing this statement with Elena's statement about the school safety measures, shows that Elena may not have been stabbed the boy if she had a friend who deter the bullying. The reliance of peer network is because of the failure of the school safety measures because children as young as elementary school age and middle school age do not have to look for friends to protect them in school. The reliance of peer networks can also lead to the formation of gangs in school which would negatively affect the safety of students, teachers, school officials and parents making the school an unsafe place to learn, to teach and to work. In *Suspended*, Bell analyzed how students in the inner cities relied on their peers for support against violence. According to Bell (2021), having a supportive peer network can help mitigate the adverse effects of bullying. According to the study, students who reported having supportive peers had better mental health outcomes and were less likely to experience depressive symptoms. Furthermore, students who felt safe and supported by their peers were more likely to feel safe and supported at school. Peers can offer various types of

assistance, such as emotional support and problem-solving assistance. According to Davis and Nixon (2010), peers can provide emotional support by "showing empathy, offering words of encouragement, and being a source of comfort during difficult times" (p. 281). Peers can also help their friends solve problems by offering practical solutions or brainstorming strategies for dealing with bullying.

Skai, a Middle school student, explained that he was not bullied because his friends protected him from being jumped on.

Interview: Did you rely on your friends for protection?

Skai: For sure, that's why I always hang around them.

Interview: Did you think your friends protected you from getting bullied?

Skai: Yea, they did jump a lot people in that school, they've never jumped me

Interview: What do you mean by jumped?

Skai: A lot of people beat on you. That never happened to me. I knew all the popular people, so I did not get bullied.

**{Skai, Middle school student, 3 suspensions, Chicago}**

Skai's statement shows how the school was unsafe and everybody was getting jumped on but due to his reliance on peer network, he avoided being attacked. Ttofi et al. (2011) also discovered that peer interventions could effectively reduce bullying behavior. According to the study, when students intervened in bullying situations, the likelihood of the behavior continuing decreased significantly. This implies that peers can also play an active role in preventing and dealing with bullying in the classroom. The friends of Skai really did protect him from being bullied. Skai also stated that he knew the popular kids which also helped prevent him from being bullied.

### **Role of parents in the code's adoption**

During the interview, student participants stated how their parents influence their use of violence in school. Six parent participants said they encouraged their children to use violence

only as self-defense. The study's findings align with the finding of the scholar who proposed the school code. Bell's (2021) findings suggest that the *Code of the School* is a transfer of knowledge via parents who are aware of the street code. Parents significantly influence their children's behavior and attitudes, including how they understand and navigate the "street code." Hirschi and Gottfredson (1983) discovered two ways parents could influence their children's behavior that include socialization and control. Socialization refers to how parents teach their children about their culture's values and norms, including the street code. This can be accomplished through direct instruction, such as explaining to students what behaviors are acceptable and unacceptable in their neighborhood, or through modeling, such as how to interact with others in the community. Control refers to how parents regulate their children's behavior by establishing rules and monitoring their activities. In the context of the street code, parents can set rules for their children to follow, such as avoiding certain areas or not associating with certain people.

Papa Jay, a father of an elementary school student who comes from Africa, stated that he told his son to avoid violence but in situation when it becomes inevitable to avoid been bullied, he has the right to defend himself.

Interviewer: What advice did you give to your child?

Papa Jay: I always advice my child to avoid conflict with people. I told them to leave that place and report to the teacher. In a situation where someone tries to slap you, you need to fight back. There is no time to report in certain situations. You must react but positively. We call that in French, "légitime défendre" that means the right to defend themselves in a dangerous situation. That happen

**{Papa Jay, a father of an elementary school students, suspension 2, Bloomington}**

Papa Jay statement suggests that students have the right to protect themselves from harm only when violence is inevitable. He statements further suggests that there is no time to complain to teachers considering the response time hence the only thing to do is to defend oneself. He

stated his grievance in French, which is his mother tongue, which shows how serious he considers the issue.

Papa Danovo, a father of a middle school student who stated that he told his children that when someone puts their hand on them, they must defend themselves else the bullying would continue.

Interviewer: Do you tell your child to fight the bully?

Danovo: I tell my children if somebody put their hands on you, put your hands on the person back. I feel uncomfortable saying that but if you don't do that, they will keep bullying you. If nobody touches you, you can't fight the person. If you don't defend yourself, they will be doing it until you defend yourself. You have the freedom to say what you want with your mouth, but you don't have the freedom to touch me. I told my son to fight, and I know they would suspend him but at least that kid won't fight him again.

**{Papa Danovo, a father of a Middle school student, Suspension 3, Chicago}**

Papa Danovo suggests that although he feels uncomfortable recommending violence to his children, they need it. His recommendation emphasizes that if there is physical violence, the child may need to defend themselves. His statement emphasizes that bullying continues when no action is taken and that parents know it occurs in their children's schools. Danovo, like most parents, due to the lack of alternatives, advises his son to use violence only when other students use violence against him. He stated that if other students verbally bullied his son, his son could ignore them because everybody had a right to say what they wanted. However, some verbal bullying may lead to physical altercation in school. Verbal bullying can often escalate into physical fights if not addressed and stopped early in school. When verbally bullied, students may become frustrated, angry, and upset and feel compelled to defend themselves physically. Schools must address verbal bullying immediately upon recognition to prevent physical violence. Schools, parents, and teachers can all play an essential role in preventing verbal bullying which creates a safe school environment. As most parent recommend violence as a self-defense

mechanism, school officials must liaise with parents to recommend better strategies to their children. Parents should advise their children that, when possible, they should avoid violence, and nonviolent conflict resolution and defense strategies should be prioritized. Schools should also create a safer environment for students and give students the tools they need to defend themselves and resolve conflicts peacefully, making everyone's learning environment safer and more supportive.

### **Poor relationship between law enforcement and students**

A poor relationship between law enforcement and children can harm all parties involved, including students, police officers, and school administrators. It can result in tension, anxiety, and a breakdown in communication between school authorities and the school community. During law enforcement operations, it may be more difficult for officers who have not established rapport with students to obtain cooperation and may face more student resistance. As a result of school shootings, the study discovered that parents support the presence of police officers in schools. Five student participants stated they had a positive relationship with the school's police officers. In contrast, three stated that the officers were laid-back and did not interfere with student affairs. Two students said that their school did not have any police officers. One of the parent participants explained in detail why she disliked the police officers' presence. Considering recent events, the remaining nine parents stated that they had a relationship with law enforcement and appreciated police officers in schools.

Interviewer: How would you consider your relationship with police officers?

Mama Vera: My only problem with them involving police officers is the use of excessive force because it's a child. I grew up in the Southside Chicago and I have seen the use of excessive force and it's not right. I do not believe in excessive force it's not necessary to

put a child on trial. You can restrain them without hurting them. In some instances, there are some children that are much bigger than some resource officers that are much bigger than resources officers, I believe there should be some force not excessive force.

**{Mama Vera, Mother of a Middle School student, Suspension 2, Bloomington}**

The statement of Mama Vera indicates that she is okay with the presence of police officers in school. The only problem she had was using excessive force by some police officers since they were dealing with a sensitive population. The statement by Mama Vera indicated that she was inferring from her experience with police officers when she was in Chicago. School discipline scholars suggest that factors such as personal experiences with law enforcement and perceptions of school safety may shape parents' views on police officers in schools and the use of excessive force on students (Kupchik & Ward, 2014). Others may be concerned about police officers engaging in excessive force or discriminatory practices (Kupchik & Ward, 2014). The statement of Mama Vera, who fears her child would have the same experience is consistent with the findings of the book, *Suspended* (Bell, 2021).

Micah, a high school student who lives in Normal, stated that he did not have a good relationship with police officers and that he believed they were there to perform their duties. He also stated that before the interview, he had not considered police officers' relationship with students as he only saw them performing their duties in school.

Interviewer: Did you have a good relationship with police officers?

Micah: No, I just think they were there to do their jobs, I did not think much into that.

Interviewer: How would you consider your relationship with the teachers?

Micah: I would say some are good or some are not

**{Micah, High School student, Suspension 3, Normal}**

Micah's statement indicates that he does not have a good relationship with the police officer in the school. The relationship between students and school police can be complex and multidimensional. Researchers suggest that school police officers should be more concerned with

fostering positive relationships with students than enforcing the law (Barrier, 2023). The scholars further emphasized the need for officers to engage in proactive measures, such as mentoring and counseling, to foster positive interactions and prevent hostile conduct (Barrier, 2023). According to research, however, police officers in schools may have adverse effects on some students, particularly those from marginalized or minority groups (Kupchik et al., 2020). Scholars argue that Black and Latino students were more likely to report negative interactions with school police, such as feeling harassed or unfairly targeted (Kupchik et al., 2020).

Brayden, a Middle school student, stated that he had a good relationship with police officers which shows that his suspension had nothing to do with the presence of police officers.

Interviewer: How is your relationship with police officers in school?

Brayden: I would say very nice, very resourceful, always making sure everything is good. I would say very good. He is often viewed as a safe person to go to in school.

**{Brayden, Middle school student, Suspension 2, Chicago}**

A positive relationship between students and school police officers can have multiple benefits, including promoting safety, preventing crime and violence, and promoting positive attitudes toward law enforcement. The statement by Brayden shows that he trusted the police in the school. When students observe police officers in their school regularly, they may feel safer and more secure. This can lead to a decrease in disruptive behaviors that negatively impact student learning and well-being, such as bullying and violence. Students can gain a deeper understanding of law enforcement officers and their role in maintaining the safety of communities by interacting with police officers in a positive and supportive environment. This can contribute to the growth of trust and positive attitudes toward police officers, resulting in improved community and law enforcement relations.

Similarly, when I asked Anna about her relationship with police officers, she stated that students did not listen to the police officer in her school. Anna did not state whether

she had a good relationship with the police officer, but she stated what other students recommended.

Anna: Mmm, some students they don't listen to what the police officer says, others think he can get better on his job because he is kinda laid back.

**{Anna, Elementary school student, Suspension1, Chicago}**

The statement by Anna shows that the police officer in the school is being friendly to the students but could be more effective with them. It is essential to listen to students' grievances if they allege the police officer is being too lenient in schools composed of students of color and to pursue a further inquiry into the matter. It is plausible that police officer must meet their obligations as anticipated or render sufficient assistance to the school community. Police officers may need to fulfill their expected duties or adequately support the school community. This strategy helps the relationship between students and the officer.

### **Social media and violence**

Using social media as a platform for bullying is a surprising theme that arose from the study. Unfortunately, social media has become a popular tool for bullies to intimidate and harass their victims in schools where bullying is a severe problem. Six student participants stated that social media was a medium through which some students got bullied. Only one parent participant stated that students got bullied through social media. When I asked the students if their parents knew they were bullied through social media, three answered that they did not tell their parents about it. Through social media channels like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat, bullies can victimize their targets in multiple ways, including posting derogatory remarks, distributing mortifying visuals, and propagating gossip. Cyberbullying can have devastating consequences for students.

Mama Esther, a mother of Middle school stated that the most significant cause of bullying is trauma and that the most prominent medium through which students get bullied is social media.

Interviewer: What are your views on bullying, what causes bullying?

Esther: I believe the biggest cause of bullying is trauma. What is happening in the home? Another can be peer pressure. There are people out there that is easily influenced. The biggest one is social media because it has become the norm to talk about people online. Cyber bullying at this point may be bigger than the bullying you see in school.

**{Mama Esther, mother of Middle School student, Suspension 3, Bloomington}**

Mama Esther, a parent participant, stated that social media is the most effective medium through which students get bullied. Although Mama Esther was the only parent who stated that social media is a way students get bullied, this point is crucial because she works as a schoolteacher in an alternative school. Regarding social media, parental perspectives may vary. Others may be concerned about the adverse effects of social media on mental health and well-being, as well as the possibility of cyberbullying. In contrast, others may view social media as a valuable tool for communication and peer-to-peer connection.

Lydia, a Middle school student who had experienced bullying, stated that social media was a means through which many students get bullied.

Interviewer: Have you ever gotten bullied?

Lydia: Yes, I have gotten bullied, and everybody bullied, bullying was a big thing. I feel like the bullying was harsh. I don't think I can speak for everybody. Some people didn't know that they were bullying but they were laughing at other people, and online which is also considered as bullying through snapchat, Facebook and Instagram. That

**{Lydia, Middle school student, suspension 1, Chicago}**

Lydia's statement indicated that most students are unaware that some of their behaviors can be considered bullying. This shows that many students have been bullied or are bullying others but do not understand which behavior is considered bullying. According to research

conducted by Kosir et al. (2022), some students who engage in bullying may be unaware that their actions constitute bullying in the school setting. These students may view their conduct as harmless or be oblivious to its negative impact on others. Educators must inform students about what constitutes bullying behavior and cultivate a community-wide culture of respect and kindness. This may necessitate initiating programs and plans that foster students' empathy, social abilities, and approaches to dealing with disagreement.

Hannah, a Middle School student who was bullied at school, stated that the bullying occurred online and was more about material things.

Interviewer: What would you say was the cause of the bullying?

Hannah: It was more about materialistic things, more about the clothes you are wearing, the shoes, it's more about materialistic things. It happened online like TikTok.

**{Hannah, Middle school student, suspension 1, Bloomington}**

*Bullying* is a severe problem that affects both the victim and the bully. Hannah's statement demonstrates that some students misuse social media by flaunting their talents to intimidate their peers. This bullying type may be complex for teachers and school officials to address. As a result, schools should encourage students who are bullied on social media to report it immediately while keeping their identities anonymous because students do not like to snitch on their peers. Online bullying, also known as cyberbullying, has become more common as social media and other digital platforms have grown in popularity. Material possession cyberbullying can cause feelings of inadequacy, low self-esteem, and even depression in the victim.

### **Poor relationship between school officials and students**

Another theme that emerged is the poor relationship between school officials and students. Seven student participants stated that there was no relationship between school officials and parents. Five parent participants stated no relationship between parents and school officials. One parent stated that the poor relationship led to her daughter's suspension. Parents are an integral part of the school community, and a strong partnership between them and school administrators is necessary for fostering a positive learning environment. A poor relationship between school administrators and parents can negatively impact the education and well-being of students. One student stated that he believed the school officials did not like black students. A poor relationship between school officials and students can have far-reaching effects on the school community. It can cause students to feel mistrustful, frustrated, and disinterested, negatively impacting their academic performance and well-being.

Mama Gee, a mother of a Middle school student, shares how the authorities suspended her daughter and the other girl because they were fighting. She further stated that her daughter was allowed to come back to school, but the other girl was not allowed to come back to school because her husband was a police officer. She further stated that she talked to the principal and the school superintendent to bring the other girl back because that was unfair.

Interviewer: Was your daughter suspended?

Mama Gee: Yes, I talked to the principal and the dean, and superintendent, they told her to come back to school. On the other hand, they went and tried to talk to the other parent. They suspended both my daughter and the other girls that hit her. They allowed my baby, daughter to come to school but they didn't allow the other girl to come back because I guess they know my husband is a police officer.

**{Mama Gee, Middle school students' mother, Suspension 4 each, Peoria}**

Mama Gee's statement indicated that the student would only be allowed to come back school if she had spoken to the authorities. The school officials should have treated the other student reasonably, which can lead to distrust among students. Multiple components, like misinterpretation, miscommunication, opposing perspectives, and conflicting expectations, can create a contentious relationship between parents and school officials. However, such a relationship can harm the student's education and well-being. As a result, it is critical to address the issues and improve the relationship between parents and school officials. Mama Gee's statement on speaking to the school officials affected the results of the issue. Therefore, when parents come together to fight for the right of students, it can affect the systemic discrimination in some public schools.

Similarly, the statement of Mama Vera is almost the same as that of Mama Gee. Mama Vera stated that parents do not trust school officials.

Interviewer: How do you consider your relationship with school officials?

Mama Vera: There is a disconnection between students and school officials. Parents do not trust the school officials including the principals. It is difficult to hold a meeting with school officials. There should be transparency. We need an African American principal. You only see them in the community when it is election time, that's a big problem.

Mama Vera: the African American children are suffering; the kids can't trust nobody.

Interviewer: Would support school suspension for dangerous offenses?

Mama Vera: I support school suspension on issues that are of danger to students. In school suspension is better than out of school suspension because parents need to be at work and children need to be at school learning. I don't care if you feel what they did was wrong just give them detention. Parents cannot leave their children at home because if you get a DCSF case. But the principal, she would be reporting parents to the DCSF. Parents cannot leave their children at home. You know putting them out of school to sit at home is just ridiculous which doesn't make sense. It is not helping them; they are at home. What are they learning at home? If parents could stay with their children, it would be fine, but we work and we don't leave work until 5pm.

**{Mama Vera, Mother of a Middle School student, Suspension 2, Bloomington}**

The statement by Mama Vera indicates that there was once a relationship between parents and school officials, but that relationship no longer exist. According to her, this has led to distrust between parents and school officials. According to scholars, a lack of trust between school officials and parents can negatively impact the education and well-being of the student (Reaves & Cozzens, 2018). Identifying the issue and implementing measures to restore trusts, such as open communication, consistency, accountability, collaboration, professional development, and mediation, are crucial for resolving this issue. Cooperating toward a common goal allows school administrators and parents to develop a strong rapport and provide the best education possible for a student. Her statement demonstrates that school officials are not working with parents to determine what works best for parents when their children are suspended. Her statement also implies that, while parents may support schools suspending children, those decisions should not be left solely in the hands of school authorities, as this may jeopardize the parents' employment. According to Bell's research, school punishment harms the employment of Black mothers, which is consistent with these findings (Bell, 2021).

Randy, a Middle school student, stated that school officials do not like black kids. He explained how students fear school authorities and cannot report bullying incidents to them.

Interviewer: What about your relationship with school authorities?

Randy: The relationship with school authorities is sometimes bad. They don't like black students. Students are scared of the school authorities, and they are not able to report bullying incidents to them.

**{Randy, Middle school student, 2 suspensions, Bloomington}**

Randy's statement shows no relationship between students and school authorities. Many students fear school administrators due to the poor relationship between school administrators and students. This fear can result in a breakdown in communication and a lack of trust between students and school administrators, which can harm students' academic performance and overall

well-being. Policymakers and school officials must create a safe, supportive, and valued school environment for all students by establishing positive relationships between school officials and students.

I asked Mama Joy if the poor relationship between school officials and parents was affecting the students, and a response indicated that it affected students of color more than other racial groups.

Interviewer: Do you think this is affecting the black children?

Mama Joy: Yes, the children are not seeing any black face and they cannot trust the teachers and the school authorities. They want qualified teachers, and they say that African American teachers applying are not qualified. How is it that they are qualified to teach in “School A” but are not qualified to teach in “School B”. I have a problem, I don’t think anyone is looking at that, when you go to “School B”.

Interviewer: Do you feel that there is no representation of black educators?

Mama Joy: There is no representation of the community in which they serve. The community in what they serve is diverse.

**{Mama Joy, mother of an Elementary school student, Suspension 1, Normal}**

The statement by Mama Joy indicated that the students could not trust school officials because they are not seeing people who looked like them. The racial background of school administrators can have an impact on their relationships with students and parents. School officials from different racial groups may bring diverse cultural backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives in their interactions with students and parents. For instance, school administrators who share the same racial or ethnic background as the students and parents they serve may be better able to relate to and comprehend their experiences and concerns. In addition, they may be more attuned to their community's cultural values and norms, which can facilitate the development of trust and rapport with students and parents. On the other hand, school officials from diverse racial or ethnic backgrounds may encounter difficulties when attempting to develop

relationships with students and parents from diverse communities. They may lack cultural awareness, inadvertently engage in offensive or insensitive behavior, or use coarse language.

Elena, a middle school student, stated that the bullying would have ended if her father had a relationship with the school officials.

Elena: The bullying won't have continued if my dad had approached the teachers and the school authorities. I was diagnosed with ADHD hence I am very hyperactive in class, but my friends did not understand my behavior. My mom blamed me for getting bullied.  
**{Elena, Middle School student, Suspension 3, Chicago}**

Elena's statement shows that she could not tell her story to the school officials because there was no relationship. Her report indicated that if her dad had told the school about her situation, things would have improved for her. A poor relationship between school administrators and parents can contribute to a school environment in which bullying is more prevalent. Inadequate collaboration and communication between parents and school administrators may result in bullying problems. In addition to the inadequacy of school safety measures and the reliance on peers for help, both student and parent interviews emphasized the poor interaction between teachers and kids. Six students indicated that their teachers' weak relationships prevented them from reporting bullying instances. Five parents also indicated that the bad interaction between teachers and pupils harmed the level of trust between all three parties. According to one parent, the lack of representation in the school made it difficult for pupils to connect with their teachers. According to the parent, the student population was diverse, however the teaching population was not.

Mama Jane, a mother of a Middle school student, stated that the teachers had a poor relationship with parents and students. She also stated that teachers do not listen to the parents and students.

Interviewer: What about your children's relationship with teachers?

Jane: That is where the problem is. The teachers do not have a good relationship with the parents and my children are not able to report anything to the teacher.

Interviewer: Is there a good relationship between teachers and parents?

Jane: No, they don't listen to us. They are doing everything on their own.

**{Mama Jane, Mother of a Middle School student, Suspension 2, Bloomington}**

The statement of Mama Jane is consistent with studies carried out decades ago. Several studies have indicated that elementary and middle school teachers, parents, and students have bad connections. Epstein and Sanders (2006) found that elementary school parents felt alienated from their child's school. In a 2007 study, Pomerantz, Moorman, and Litwack found that middle school students felt disengaged from their teachers and that their teachers had low expectations for them. One root of these strained relationships could be a breakdown in communication between teachers and parents. According to Sheldon and Epstein (2005), teachers who communicated with parents more frequently and effectively positively interacted with both parents and pupils. Instructors who did not have contact with parents had worse relationships with pupils and parents. Lack of trust can also contribute to strained relationships between teachers, parents, and students. Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler found that parents who did not trust their child's instructor were less likely to participate in their child's education (1997). Similarly, Walton and Cohen (2007) found that pupils who needed more trust in their teachers were less likely to participate in extracurricular activities. Bad connections between instructors, parents, and students can negatively impact student achievement and well-being.

Myles, a high school student, indicated that he had a good relationship with his teachers, but he is aware of what students in underfunded schools deal with within school. His statement indicates that teachers in underfunded schools do not have a good relationship with their students.

Myles: I feel like sometimes it is good other times it can be weak. Especially if the teachers I feel like the teachers don't care about the students. I feel like there are a lot of teachers who care about the students. In underfunded schools, I think the teachers don't care are about their students. And teachers to students' relationship I feel like it is important.

**{Myles, High School student, Suspension 5, Chicago}**

In the statement, Myles indicated that he had a good relationship with his teachers and that the cause of his suspension was nothing related to his relationship with his teachers. He also states that students in underfunded schools have teachers who do not care about them. Data shows that students in well-funded schools generally have more positive relationships with their teachers than students in underfunded schools (Russo-Tait, 2022). According to a study conducted in 2021, students in well-funded schools generally report positive relationships with their teachers. In contrast, students in underfunded schools frequently report feeling disconnected from their teachers and unsupported by the school community (Baker, 2021). The statement shows that Myles had a good relationship with his teachers because he was in a well-funded public school.

### **Students' responses on the age at which students begin to use violence in school**

The study aimed to analyze the age at which students begin to use violence in school as a self-defense mechanism. Eight students stated the age at which they got bullied in school, and two students stated the age at which other students got bullied. Ten students stated the period when they began using violence as a self-defense mechanism. Five students stated that their parents

influenced them to fight back, or the bullying would continue. Although most of the participants selected different grade levels to be the beginning of using violence as a self-defense mechanism, after analyzing the students' data, the age at which students begin to get bullied in school is first grade, second grade and third grade. The age or the grade level at which students begin to use violence in school is **Fifth grade**, that is, **10-11 years old**.

**Table 4: Student Responses**

Name (Pseudonym)	Grade level	Age student first got bullied	Age at which students begin to use violence
Elena	Middle school	Third grade	Fifth grade
Randy	Middle school	Third grade	Fourth to Fifth
Hannah	Middle school	Second grade or third grade	Fourth grade
Myles	High School	Fifth grade	Eighth grade
Lydia	Middle School	Fifth grade	Sixth grade
Micah	High school	Third grade	Nineth grade
Skai	Middle school	Fifth grade	Sixth grade
Brayden	Middle school	First grade	Third grade
Anna	Elementary school	Third grade to Fourth grade	Fifth grade
Angela	Elementary school	First grade	Fifth grade

**Parents' responses on the age at which students begin to use violence in school**

I interviewed parents and tried to ask them about twenty questions, but when I asked the age at which their children first got bullied in school, three stated that they had to find out later

that their child was bullied. The seven parents did not hesitate to answer the question of their child's first bullying experience. When it got to the question of the age at which their children began to use violence as a self-defense mechanism, seven parent participants did not hesitate to state the answer. The three parents' participants did not state the exact age they retaliated, but they gave the duration. Furthermore, inferring from the data collected from the parent participant, **fifth grade or age 10 or 11** is the age at which students begin to use violence in school.

**Table 5: Parent Responses**

Name (Pseudonym)	Grade level of their children	Age their child first got bullied	Age at which their child begins to use violence to fight back
Mama Gee	Middle School	First grade	Fifth grade
Mama Vera	Middle School	Fifth grade	Fifth grade
Mama Joy	Elementary School	Third grade	Third grade or fourth grade
Papa Jay	Elementary School	Fourth grade	Fifth grade
Mama Jane	Middle School	Fourth grade	Fourth grade or fifth grade
Mama Esther	Middle School	Fourth grade	Fifth grade or sixth grade
Mama Lily	Middle School	Kindergarten	Third grade
Papa David	Elementary School	Fourth grade	Eighth grade
Mama Edna	Middle School	Fifth grade	Fifth grade
Papa Danovo	Middle School	Second grade	Third grade

## CHAPTER V: CONCLUSION

This study examined the age at which students start engaging in violence in school. The study concentrated on elementary and middle school students suspended for fighting in school. The study aims to investigate the age at which bullying occurs in school and the link between students and teachers, students and police officers, school safety regulations, and students and school administrators. The study findings are discussed in this chapter, as well as how they contribute to the existing body of literature.

### **Study Limitations**

This study contributes to our understanding of school safety measures, but it has drawbacks. The investigation began with a look at students suspended for fighting in school. Several studies have documented students' use of violence as a form of self-defense in school and the role of parents in the school code's adoption (Bell, 2018; Mateu-Gelabert and Lune, 2007). However, locating students and parents whose children have been suspended for fighting in the Midwest was difficult, particularly in Normal and Bloomington, Illinois. Secondly, the findings of this study would better describe the experiences of African American parents and students in the Midwest, particularly in Normal and Bloomington, Illinois. The study did not include cyberbullying as leading to violence in the era of social media.

Many studies have found a link between a lack of diversity in the teaching profession and poor relationships between African American students and teachers. According to a 2018 study, African American students are more likely to achieve higher academic results when receiving instruction from teachers of the same race or ethnicity (Carver-Thomas, 2018). The study showed the poor relationship between parents and school officials because many parents

believed the teacher population did not represent the students they were teaching. Another study published in the *Journal of Teacher Education* found that when African American students had at least one teacher of the same race, they felt more connected and engaged with their teachers (Jackson & Remillard, 2005). Furthermore, black students with at least one black elementary school teacher are more likely to graduate from high school and consider attending college (Gershenson, 2018).

The research study explored the poor relationship between students and police officers in the school. The findings further support the idea that parents' experience with the police can influence their perception of police officers in the school. A study by Kincade and Fox (2022) discovered that parents with negative experiences with police officers were more likely to see police officers in schools as potentially threatening their child's safety. In addition, parents who had negative experiences with police officers were less likely to want police officers in schools (Kincade & Fox, 2022). These findings suggest that how parents perceive police officers in schools may be related to how they perceive law enforcement. Schools must be aware of these concerns and work to foster trust between police officers and the communities they serve. The study also showed that some parents supported the police officers in school due to the recent school shooting incidents. While police officers in schools might provide a sense of security, they can also contribute to the school-to-prison pipeline, particularly troublesome for kids of color and those with disabilities. When establishing such rules, assessing the potential repercussions and unintended results is essential. In addition, addressing the root causes of school shootings, such as mental health disorders and easy access to firearms, is essential for preventing future tragedies. Parents, educators, and lawmakers must unite to identify complete solutions that promote student safety and well-being. For instance, one of the student participants

indicated that she used violence as a self-defense method and that the school was unaware of her ADHD diagnosis. Her father, who was aware of the condition, failed to notify the school, which may have led to the student's incarceration because she stabbed another student who was bullying her.

### **Social Media and violence**

Although the study did not aim at studying cyberbullying, social media emerged as a medium through which students got bullied, leading to a physical altercation. Most of the students stated that they were bullied online by their colleagues, which resulted in physical altercations. Cyberbullying can result in severe consequences, including physical altercations. When social media users are bullied, they may experience feelings of threat and helplessness, which can lead to anger and frustration. If the victim is persistently bullied, they may resort to physical aggression to defend themselves or end the bullying. Cyberbullying can lead to physical altercations among adolescents. Students who reported being victims of cyberbullying are more likely to engage in physical altercations than those who do not report being victims of cyberbullying. (Litwiller & Brausch, 2013). According to scholars, interventions to prevent cyberbullying may also reduce the risk of physical violence among adolescents. (Machado et al., 2022).

### **The age at which students get bullied in school**

Results from the study indicate that the average age at which students begin to get bullied in school is in their first grade, second grade and third grade. Most of the parent participants also stated that their children were not protected. It is common for children to

struggle to identify when their peers are bullying them. Possible misunderstanding of bullying or a belief that the behavior is normal or acceptable because it originates from a known person. Children may hesitate to report bullying out of concern that doing so will harm their friendships or cause their peers to ostracize them. Parents and teachers must educate children on the different types of bullying and encourage them to speak up if they feel mistreated. This may involve teaching children to recognize the signs of bullying, such as name-calling, exclusion, and physical aggression, and giving them coping strategies. In addition, parents and educators can create a safe and supportive environment where children feel comfortable discussing their experiences and seeking help when necessary. This can include encouraging open communication, providing resources for counseling and support, and implementing anti-bullying measures.

### **The age at which students begin to use violence in school**

The study aims to investigate the age at which school violence begins to influence students' behavior. The study does not support the use of violence in school but rather analyzes why students use violence in school as a defense mechanism. From the data collected, the age at which students begin to use the "code" in school is from **10-11 years or fifth grade**. Most respondents concluded that this is the age at which they understood the importance of fighting back. Most of the parent participants indicated how they influence their children in using the school code; however, they concluded that fifth grade or 10-11 years was when children realized the importance of using the school code. The student participants added that they use the "code" to increase respect and social status in school due to the failure of the school safety measures. Some of the students in the study stated how everybody in their school was using violence; hence

the school code was the only way they could navigate the school environment. These students relied on their friends for support against bullies, and they also admitted the influence of parental advice in using the "code." Although the study is consistent with Bell et al. (2022) study that analyzed the relationship between the street and school codes, most students stated that their community did not influence their use of violence. However, their use of violence was because of institutional deprivation. Institutional deprivation includes school safety measures' failure, which forces students to rely on their friends for support against violence. However, several parent participants stated they lived in a community influenced by the street code before moving to their Bloomington-Normal. Some parent participants stated they were escaping physical violence in their previous communities but are currently experiencing racial violence.

Finally, the *Code of the School* should not be taken for granted by teachers, parents, and school officials. Students develop this violent behavior due to institutional deprivation in some public schools. Consistent with the finding of some scholars, African American parents are aware of their children using the "code"; however, these parents guide their children on when and how to use physical violence (Bell, 2021). My findings suggest that all four fathers interviewed recommended violence as a self-defense mechanism in school. One of the mothers stated that her husband recommended violence to their children. Thus, the findings show that for schools to reduce the rate of school violence, school officials must establish a relationship with fathers on how to deal with bullying. Schools can recommend to fathers not to advise their children to use physical altercations in school as this would only lead to suspension and expulsion.

With the cruciality of student behavior and safety in the school milieu, the *Code of the School* presents a critical responsibility for school personnel, academic participants, and parents

(Bell, 2018). Policymakers should create a diverse environment to help African students and parents feel included. The failure of school safety can only improve through adequate funding of public schools. Failure to ensure school safety can result in severe injuries, incarceration, deaths, and psychological trauma. Improving school safety measures is essential for providing students and teachers with a safe and conducive learning environment. There is always room for improvement, even though some schools may have implemented effective safety protocols. For example, employing new technology can assist in enhancing school safety. Schools can install security cameras to prevent and deter criminal activity. In furtherance, schools and parents must combat bullying and promote positive, healthy social interactions among students online and off. This can involve instituting regulations and protocols to tackle bullying and cyberbullying, teaching and aiding students and parents and establishing an atmosphere of admiration and inclusion. Further research should examine the age at which children engage in cyberbullying via social media and how this escalates to physical altercations. Future studies should also analyze the perception school officials on the use of the *Code of the School*.

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**HAS YOUR CHILD BEEN  
SUSPENDED OR EXPELLED FROM  
ELEMENTARY OR MIDDLE  
SCHOOL?**

**YOU ARE INVITED TO PARTICIPATE IN THE  
RESEARCH STUDY AND HAVE YOUR  
VOICE HEARD**

**WHO CAN PARTICIPATE?**

- PARENTS OF MIDWEST MIDDLE SCHOOL OR ELEMENTARY SCHOOL STUDENTS

WHO HAVE BEEN SUSPENDED OR EXPELLED BETWEEN JANUARY 2021 AND DECEMBER 2022

- MIDWEST MIDDLE SCHOOL AND ELEMENTARY STUDENTS

WHO HAVE BEEN SUSPENDED OR EXPELLED BETWEEN JANUARY 2021 AND DECEMBER 2022

- The study's goal is to determine the age at which the "code" starts to influence school violence among elementary and middle school students. The study also aims to investigate why parents advise their children to use violence to deter bullying at school.

- I am conducting this study under the direction of Dr. Charles Bell from the Department of Criminal Justice Science from the Illinois State University

**PLEASE EMAIL: [yakakpo@ilstu.edu](mailto:yakakpo@ilstu.edu) OR CALL  
(309) 2051987 IF INTERESTED IN LEARNING MORE  
ABOUT THIS STUDY**

## APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

### STUDENT INTERVIEW GUIDE

#### **General Questions**

- 1) Tell me about yourself. How do you regard school?
  - a. Why/not?
  - b. What is your favorite book?
- 2) What are your favorite sports?

#### ***Failure of traditional school safety measures***

- 3) What is your view on school safety measures?
- 4) What do you think of metal detectors in schools?
- 5) How do you consider the school safety measures?
- 6) When did you first use violence in school and why?

#### ***The school setting***

- 7) How do you feel about your school environment?
- 8) Are there fights at your school?
- 9) What do you think is the reason for those fights?
- 10) Have you been involved in fights?
- 11) At what age did you start seeing fights?
- 12) When did you begin to feel unsafe in school?
- 13) When did you feel the need to use violence to defend yourself?
- 14) Do you think race affects the way teachers treat students?
- 15) Do you think the resources in the school are effective?
- 16) How would you consider your relationship with teachers?

- 17) How would you consider your relationship with school officials?
- 18) Do you feel safe in the school environment?
- 19) How do think the school environment propels you to use the code of the school?

***Reliance on peer networks***

- 20) Have you been bullied at school before?
- 21) Would you think your friends would protect you from being bullied?
- 22) Do you think you made friends because of the bullying you faced?

***The role of parents in the code's adoption***

- 23) Are your parents aware of how you feel about the school environment?
- 24) Do your parents support you using the code of the school?
- 25) Does your community also influence your decision to use the code of the school?

***Poor relationship between law enforcement and students***

- 20) Have a police officer seen you using the code of the school?
- 21) How do you feel about police officers?
- 22) How do you consider your relationship with police officers?
- 23) Do you think the police officers are effective?
- 24) Would you recommend the police officers get some training?
- 25) How does race affect how police officers treat people?
- 26) What do you know about the disciplinary policies in your school?
- 27) Have seen or face discrimination from police officers because of race?

## **Parent Interview Guide**

### **General Questions**

1. Regarding the child that you permitted to participate in this study, how would you describe him/her?
2. Where do you see your child in five years?
3. Why is school important to you?

### ***Failure of traditional school safety measures***

4. How do you feel about school safety measures?
5. Do you think the school environment is conducive for your child?
6. How do think the school safety measure can be improved?

### ***The school setting***

7. Do you think the school environment is safe for your children?
8. When did you notice your child began to feel unsafe in school?
9. When did your child began complaining about been bullied in school?
10. When did your child first use violence in school?
11. How do the metal detectors and guards make you feel?
12. How do the metal detectors promote safety in your child's school?

### ***Perception of Neighborhood Safety***

13. How does your child get to school?

14. How do you feel about the neighborhood your child lives in?
15. How do you feel about the neighborhood your child's school is in?
16. How does the neighborhood your child's school is in make you feel about that school?

***Reliance on peer networks***

17. Do you know if your child relies on friends for protection at school?
18. Have you noticed a change in your child's friends?
19. Have you noticed a change in your child's behavior due to new friends?
20. Does your child talk about his friends using violence in school?

***The role of parents in the code's adoption***

21. Have you told your child to use violence as a defense mechanism?
22. Are you aware of your child using the code of the school?
23. How has the code of the school influenced your child's behavior?
24. Have your child been suspended because of the using the code of the school?
25. How has the code of the school changed the child's behavior?

***Poor relationship between law enforcement and students***

26. How do you feel about police officers?
27. Do you think the presence of police officers influences your child using the "code"?
28. How does race affect the way police officers treat people?
29. Do you tell your child anything about the police?

## APPENDIX C: RESEARCH NOTE

**Research Note:** Recruitment, Data Collection, and Analysis Methods

**Title:** "The Code of the School: Investigating the Age at which the 'Code' Begins to influence school violence among Students

**Recruitment Method:** Face-to-Face

This study employed face-to-face recruitment. I recruited participants from various settings, including basketball competitions, gyms, churches, offices, and food banks.

The study aimed to determine at what age students begin to use violence in school to gain respect and social standing. To ensure the inclusion of a diverse sample of students, I recruited from locations where students are likely to congregate.

The recruitment process involved providing prospective participants with information regarding the study's purpose, procedures, risks, and benefits. I confronted adolescent participants at the basketball games and gyms and provided them with study information. I asked churchgoers with adolescents if they knew anyone interested in participating. At workplaces, I approached employees with children and inquired about their interest in participating in the study. Families with children in line at the food pantry were addressed and asked if they were interested in participating. I asked the potential participants whether they had been suspended for fighting in school during the 2020-'21 academic year. I also asked parents if their children had been suspended for fighting in school. All eligible participants were requested to give verbal consent before taking part in the study. Before conducting the interview, the parents of the student participants were also required to provide verbal consent.

## Semi-Structured Interviews as a Method for Collecting Data

Through semi-structured interviews, information was gathered. The queries were intended to elucidate the experiences and perspectives of students who have used violence in school to gain respect and social status. The interviews were conducted in a private environment, such as a classroom, and lasted approximately one hour. The discussions were documented audibly and then transcribed word-for-word. After verifying the accuracy of the transcripts, qualitative data were coded and analyzed.

### **Analytical Method:** Critical Qualitative Analysis

Critical qualitative analysis was employed as the method of analysis for this study. This strategy entails examining the data critically to reveal the underlying assumptions, power dynamics, and social structures that influence the experiences and perspectives of the participants. The data were analyzed using a thematic approach, which consisted of identifying patterns and themes in the data that were relevant to the research questions. The analysis process consisted of several steps: data assimilation, coding, categorization, and interpretation.

Face-to-face recruitment, semi-structured interviews, and critical qualitative analysis methods enabled me to establish personal contact between the recruiter and participants, fostering trust and encouraging participant participation. Using a critical qualitative analysis approach also allowed for a deeper understanding of the complex social and cultural factors that influence the school experiences of violent students.