**O R I G I N A L   R E S E A R C H**

# Violence in rural communities: youth speak out!

**JC Kulig[1], BL Hall[2], R Grant Kalischuk[1]**

[1]*University of Lethbridge, Lethbridge, Alberta, Canada*
[2]*University of Calgary, Calgary, Alberta, Canada*

A B S T R A C T

**Introduction:** The current available literature does not present the viewpoints of rural youths regarding the meaning of violence. Design: A mixed method exploratory, descriptive study was conducted to generate information from rural youth about violence. The qualitative phase of the exploratory, descriptive study is reported here.
**Results:** Interviews with fifty-two youth (20 males and 32 females), ranging in age from 11 to 19 years in grades 7–12 in the public school system were conducted in two rural communities. The participants initially defined violence as a physical act with intent to harm, but did not consider weapon carrying as an issue in their communities. They identified alcohol consumption as a trigger for violence and described planned fights that occurred away from school grounds. Physical fights were not limited to the male students. The youth openly stated that violence exists in rural communities and felt isolated from adults with regard to understanding the youths' experiences with violence.
**Conclusion:** It is important to generate information about violence directly from rural youth. Programs to reduce violence that include the youth are important to pursue.

**Key words:** mixed methods, rural communities, rural youth, violence.

## Introduction

*In this small town everybody knows everything that you do, word gets around very quickly and people just always find out the next day.* [Female youth]

An understanding of violence from the perspectives of rural youth is presented in this article, based on the first phase of a mixed method exploratory, descriptive study intended to understand rural youth violence. This first phase of the study focused on qualitative interviews conducted with 52 youth in

two rural, resource-reliant communities in southern Alberta, Canada[1].

In this study, the definition of rural and small town consists of residents in communities with a population of less than 10 000, living outside the main commuting zones of larger urban centres[2]. Youth includes those individuals from 11 to 19 years of age, in grades 7–12 in the public school system. The working definition of violence in this study was: 'an act with the intention, or perceived intention, of causing physical pain or injury to another person'[3,p.15] and bullying was viewed as physical or psychological harassment[4].

Available policy documents stress that a limited exposure to violence is a component of healthy living[5]. Violence has been more often studied in urban settings, leading to a reliance on general summaries and pre-existing recommendations for all types of communities, regardless of their nature and context[6]. Knowledge about violence in rural settings is, therefore, needed to strengthen ongoing population health efforts within public health systems[7]. Conducting research on violence in rural areas can also lead to policy development that is regionally specific while adding to the national agenda on healthy communities for all members of society[7].

The limited information concerning rural youth violence includes a quantitative study conducted in a rural Canadian community[8] which used a self-administered questionnaire with 347 adolescents to examine the relationship between violence and mental health. This study did not focus on the youths' definitions of violence but the findings are noteworthy because youth who were exposed to violence, as witnesses or victims, reported higher levels of depression and psychiatric problems, as well as self-esteem concerns.

Other research including rural youth is limited to American-based locales[9] which may not be generalizable to the Canadian context. However, a recent account of school shootings in two American rural communities confirms the necessity of understanding the nature of rural communities when examining violence. In these particular settings, the social structure of the rural community prevented families from speaking with the perpetrators' families before the situations escalated[10]. Thus, understanding the nature of rural youth violence is a topic that needs to be addressed.

**Design**

A mixed method exploratory, descriptive study was conducted consisting of two phases: a qualitative phase followed by the development of a questionnaire to be used in a subsequent quantitative phase. The overall goal of the study was to generate information about violence among youth in rural settings including: (i) their perceptions and experiences; (ii) available resources to address violence in rural communities; and (3) rural youths' perspectives of solutions regarding violence. Only the results of the qualitative phase will be described here. Ethical approval was obtained from the second author's academic institution.

The qualitative phase was conducted over a one-year period with the participation of youth aged 11–19 in grades 7–12 in two rural resource-reliant communities (ie, logging, mining and agriculture) in Southern Alberta, Canada. Both communities had a population of less than 6500 people. Community meetings and media announcements were held in each locale to notify the residents of the study. In addition to a toll-free number, a web page with downloadable consent forms was developed to provide information about the study.

Research assistants (RAs) were hired and trained to conduct the interviews. Preparation focused on skills to integrate into the community, obtain consents, conduct interviews, and analyze data. To promote understanding of rural youth violence within a community context and enhance credibility, the RAs attended youth-oriented events such as basketball games and other activities such as skateboarding. They spent considerable time at the schools in the participating communities in order to build rapport with teachers, counselors, support staff and students. Meetings with community personnel such as recreational services and the local substance abuse prevention officer were also initiated by the RAs.

The RAs handed out posters to the youth in the schools and placed them in public locations (eg, bulletin boards) and attended parent-teacher nights to notify the community that the study had commenced and to encourage youth to volunteer to participate. The most fruitful means of recruitment was through visits to the schools and making personal contacts with students during class. The cooperation of the school principals and secretaries in excusing youth from classes to be interviewed in a private room significantly contributed to the success of the study.

The interviews were conducted after receiving informed consents from both the parents and the youth. Demographic information was collected followed by an in-depth taped interview using a guide which asked questions such as: What does violence mean to you?, and Have you experienced violence? Both transcriptions and field notes were analyzed.

Regular research team meetings were held with the RAs to provide feedback about the interviews, address any concerns and discuss the meaning of the data. Counseling services were available for use by the participants even though they were not utilized. Protocol for reporting possible child abuse or neglect was discussed with the RAs, and reports were made to the child welfare authorities as deemed appropriate by the authors.

A graduate research assistant was hired to compile the demographics and assist with the analysis. Data analysis consisted of reading the transcripts simultaneously with data collection to ensure inclusion of a representative range of students and to ensure all relevant questions were being asked. Continual reading of the transcripts allowed for an identification of categories and for constant comparison with emerging categories to ensure a thorough analysis was achieved. Data analysis was also aided by the use of the search function in a word processing package.

Following the preliminary data analysis, participants were invited to focus groups to assist in confirming or expanding the results. One community did not participate in this due to time constraints but in the other community, two 45 min focus groups were held. The preliminary findings were presented by the investigators to the 31 participants at the focus groups, and general discussion followed allowing for confirmation of the initial analysis. Additional thoughts and comments about the issue of violence among youth in rural communities were also generated.

After completion of the preliminary analysis of the interviews and focus groups, offers were made to the participating schools to present the findings of the study to the teaching staff. In both instances, the principals indicated that it would not be worthwhile for the authors to hold such a meeting due to the anticipated low turnout and because a general community meeting would be held. Therefore, only a community meeting was held at each location; letters of invitation were sent to all schools including those from where the participants were drawn as well as other schools in the community. Letters were sent to the town councils, family services, police departments, recreational services, women's centres, health services and child welfare agencies. The media was used to encourage the general public to attend. In both communities, there was limited involvement with only 10 people attending both meetings. Interestingly, only one teacher (the principal) attended one meeting whereas at the other location, three teachers (two principals and one teacher) were present.

In this qualitative research, trustworthiness was established through credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability[11]. Transferability is the process through which other individuals identify the findings as applicable to their own situation. Credibility is identifying how accurate the findings have been described and interpreted within the interviews. Both were accomplished by holding the focus groups to discuss and refine the data analysis. Dependability means that enough information is provided for someone else to follow the researchers' decision trail and obtain comparable results; this was established by employing a graduate research assistant who independently coded transcripts as a means of verifying the research team's themes and categories. Confirmability implies that the

findings and conclusions of the study are supported by actual data, as noted through the quotes included in this article.

### Limitations

Limitations of this research included the self-selection of study participants which might not have included youth already involved in violent activities. The age range among participants contributed to the varying depth of the interviews, with older youths speaking in greater detail about rural youth violence. In addition, the RAs' skills varied, and hence there was a lack of consistency in drawing the participant out to state more about the issues. Moreover, family members and school staff who may have added other perspectives were not included in the study population.

# Results

### Demographics

Out of the 52 youths (20 males and 32 females) who were interviewed, 50 or 96% were Caucasian. The youth were asked about their ethnic backgrounds which included a range of groups with the majority identifying themselves as eastern European (ie, Hungarian, Polish and German). Of the participants, 31/52 (60%) lived with both biological parents, 13 (25%) lived with one biological parent and 8 (15%) lived with one biological parent and one stepparent. The majority of the students had siblings living in the home with them. For example, 31 youth or 59% lived with either one or two siblings.

The youth who were interviewed had lived in the communities the majority of their lives; 18 or 35% lived there for 16-20 years whereas 14 or 27% lived there for 11-15 years, 10 or 19% had lived there for 5-10 years and 8 or 15% had lived there for 1-4 years. Only 2 or 4% had lived in the communities for less than a year. The majority of the youths lived in town ($n = 38$, 73%) with far fewer living on a farm ($n = 8$, 15%), ranch ($n = 3$, 6%) or acreage ($n = 3$, 6%).

### The meaning and experience of violence

All participants were asked to define violence. In both communities, despite the kind of violence discussed, the comments imply that violence is about power, and it is a physical act with the intent to harm others. Examples of physical violence included hitting, beating, throwing things at others, fights using weapons like knives or other objects such as liquor bottles. Other kinds of violence included psychological (eg, name calling, glares, accusations, rumors), most often used by girls and perceived as the most damaging to the recipient; bullying, which included both physical and psychological violence; and sexual violence.

Despite the definitions that described the use of weapons, the actual carrying of weapons was not perceived as an issue in either community nor in the respective school settings. The youth emphasized that they felt safe attending their school and identified teachers who were supportive of them. Weapons, like posts or bats were sometimes taken to fight scenes, but the youth commented that they were never used to harm others but only to demonstrate 'toughness'.

Participants who had seen physical fights experienced fear, loneliness, discomfort, a general feeling of unease, and a sense that they did not belong in the group. No one described these experiences as positive.

Youth in both communities spoke of the relationship between alcohol and violence. They said that it was not uncommon for fist fights to occur at parties due to intoxication. Females in the sample attributed part of this problem to the males' need to 'show off' and be 'macho'. Examples of reasons for fights at the parties included other young men 'coming on' to a female causing the boyfriend to be jealous. There was less discussion of any links between using drugs and acting violently, with only a few saying that smoking marijuana would lead to violence.

The youth described occasions where fights between males were planned at school to be held at designated locations at specified times. Each community had their own place off

school grounds where such fights would normally occur in order to help reduce the possibility of a suspension. Sometimes the situation resolved itself before the fight even took place, but at other times the youth did meet and the fight occurred. The females provided an audience for the fighters, cheering on the male they were supporting. Watching fights gave youth in these rural communities something to do. In these locales, which were described as boring places to live, watching fights was not only described as entertainment but also as 'normal' for their age. The youth made it clear that they go to certain locations to party and drink under age. Given these circumstances and the mixture of emotions and behaviors (ie, girls flirting with other boys who are not their boyfriends), fighting did occur. The youth described this as 'their world', one not likely to be supported by their parents and other adults; they believed the behaviors that occur at these parties are manageable by them as a group.

Regardless of the community, the youth directed violence at other youth from the surrounding towns; usually in relation to competition between school sport teams. However, violence between youth from different towns also occurred when the groups met at parties in one of the communities.

Girls were not exempt from planning fights, but the style of fighting among this group focused more on bullying and using what was referred to as 'verbal violence'. It was not as socially acceptable for girls to physically fight but when the girls did, some participants described them as more vicious, using their nails and pulling hair. In addition, fights among girls were drawn out with the issue continuing for a time period in the school setting. Generally though, the girls were described by one female participant as 'talk[ing] big, but they don't actually want to do stuff'.

## Bullying

There were two girls who were interviewed who admitted to being bullies which led to difficulties with the law. For one of these girls, bullying gave her power as exemplified by others offering to do her homework. The other girl

participated in violence to look 'tough' and 'cool'. One of the female youth said:

> *After my fight, beating up right, I was known as a major bully, nobody messed with me, and I found myself to be overwhelmed with the respect that I got from other people, like it got to the point where I would walk down the hallway and people would move out of the way, because they didn't know what I was going to do.*

Another perspective about this issue was shared by a girl who said that bullying others back allowed her to hide her true feelings about feeling unwanted. A male youth who had also been a bully noted that he felt victimized and subsequently learned to change and no longer be a bully.

In both communities the participants described a hierarchy of students within their schools. In one of the participating communities, the youth referred to this as the 'food chain' while, in the other, it was discussed as the 'pecking order'. Within these hierarchies, names were given to describe the youth. Students who used skateboards, the 'skaters', were most often perceived as using illicit drugs. Other examples were persons being called 'cowboys' and 'preppies'. Within the hierarchy, there is a natural ordering of the groups. Once you are considered part of a particular group, not only your activities but also your behaviors are determined, including wearing specific clothing. In support of this notion, one female youth said:

> *You can't wear weird things in school ever…unless you're really at the top of the social ladder you can wear whatever you want and everybody else wants to be like you then.*

It was openly acknowledged by the participants that respect was associated with being known as a 'fighter'. Examples were provided by bullies who were interviewed that other students simply moved out of their way when they encountered one another in the hallway. This reinforced the

power held by the bully and reinforced the bully's actions of intimidating others. In one instance, a female youth retaliated against the bully who finally left her alone; subsequently, they developed an ongoing friendship. Some youth learned to be bullies from their own parents who were known as bullies when they were young or, as adults, were mean to their families or others in the community.

Among girls, bullying was said to occur if the girl was promiscuous. Interestingly, in both rural communities, girls whose sexual behaviors surpassed group norms were openly criticized by the participants. Rumors were a form of psychological violence used in these cases which could permanently damage a girl's reputation.

Being bullied was demeaning and participants who had been bullied talked about the damaging affect it had on their self-esteem and their physical health. In both communities, youth often acted toward one another by yelling or casually punching one another. They cautioned that this is normal behavior because the intent is not to harm one another; however, they acknowledged that this can be misinterpreted by adults.

### The causes of violence

The participants were asked about the causes of violence to which they responded that being involved in violence was a conscious choice related to one's upbringing, personality, peer influence, impact of the media, and boredom. Ultimately, being violent was inter-related with the perpetrators' values developed as a result of their upbringing. Examples were provided of youth who live in homes where domestic violence is perceived as a solution to problems. Several participants experienced domestic violence in their homes to the point of involvement of the police. In the past, a few participants had been abused by one of their parents before the authorities dealt with the situation. One male participant commented, 'if it's an abusive family to begin with, then it's going to be an abusive family forever'.

The participants believed that youth need to control their behaviors, and if they were raised in homes with limited parental guidance or clear boundaries in place, then the youth did not learn how to act in appropriate ways. One male participant commented:

*I think it comes to a lot of like how they were raised. Like if they have a poor family basis in their home, if their parents say, here's your food, go to school, and they go to work, and they barely see their parents, I don't think that helps it.*

Beyond the family circumstances, participants noted that individuals are violent or bullies because of personal problems or personality traits, including limited social skills. Holding grudges or wanting revenge could also lead to violence. The multifaceted combination of hormone shifts in the teen years, alcohol use, the challenge of interacting with others, and limited skills for dealing with problems were identified as factors contributing to violent behavior.

Peer standards and pressure were identified as other reasons for youth involvement in violence. Thus, bullying would be related to an individual's need to conform to group standards and expectations. Youth also learned about violence through media, such as television and movies. Repeatedly through the interviews, the youth indicated that violence has become normalized within our society. These youth maintained that younger age groups were exposed to violent television shows more often than when they themselves were younger. Youth today have access to computers and the world wide web and where some material is not always appropriate.

The final cause of violence noted by the participants was boredom. The rural communities where the study was conducted were described as 'nursing homes for the old' that displayed little interest in the youth. The participants talked openly about being anxious to leave and related how they felt no connections with their communities or interest in their future in these locales.

## *Violence in a rural context*

The youth in the study were asked to describe their perceptions of violence in rural settings. One of the participants stated that violence in small towns is based on the desire to act out against one's parents because it is easy to damage their reputation in the community. Overall, gangs were associated with urban areas, whereas in rural communities, groups were more important. One female youth said:

> *I don't think there's so much as gangs…there's no like, known gangs, but there's different groups of people like the cowboys and the preppy people, and the smokers, like there's just different groups there's not like gangs.*

Participants who had lived in cities said that violence in urban settings was more intense and occurred more frequently than in rural areas. In addition, for urban areas, violence was perceived to be related to discrimination and racism because of the presence of higher numbers of ethnic groups. Due to the perceived substance abuse problems in cities, violence was perceived to be more common in urban contexts.

Community controls for violence include being familiar with one's neighbors. Thus, stories travel quickly from person to person, leading to the perception that psychological violence was more common in rural communities in comparison with urban areas.

The majority of the participants believed that violence was an issue in their communities. Overall, however, they maintained that violence is more commonplace in society in general. They also perceived that it was not being addressed by community members and, in one of the communities, it was believed that violence was more common among the youth rather than adults.

## *Community resources for dealing with violence*

A number of local resources were mentioned in the interviews as a means for dealing with violence but youth were not accessing them for assistance. Standard responses such as the local health unit, substance abuse prevention office, and churches as well as the police and social workers were listed. Simultaneously, a number of participants indicated that working with the police would not be desirable and that contacting school counselors was not always wise because there was a perception that bullying would worsen for the victim. One female youth said:

> *I would talk to a counselor about some problems that I was having in school and sometimes they give the counselor a room right beside another room that gets used by kids a lot. And it's not very good because they can listen in and they know who you are, because they say your name or whatever.*

Youth groups were described as providing a supportive atmosphere which would ultimately help youths with personal or family problems to cope with their lives. Many of the youth interviewed commented that they would go, and had gone, to individuals such as their parents, siblings or friends. Sometimes the youth were provided with sound advice about how to deal with being bullied while, at other times, the youth were encouraged to retaliate against the bully. When the parents disagreed, with one stating the youth should retaliate and the other believing the youth should walk away, the youth was still left with little guidance regarding an appropriate solution. Talking to someone of your own age was particularly significant and thus friends were important. Gender was not an important criterion for seeking help from friends or family.

## *Solutions for dealing with youth violence*

When participants were asked about solutions for dealing with youth violence, the importance of reducing boredom in the communities was emphasized. A gathering place for the youth, such as a teen centre, was proposed. This suggestion

had been implemented in one of the communities but was short lived, in part due to its manner of operation and heavy use by older teens, thus making it uncomfortable for the younger teens to attend. There were some participants who noted that attending such a centre would be perceived as a sign of weakness by others. Beyond a gathering place, having more activities for youth was also suggested.

Developing partnerships with groups, such as the police, to develop initiatives for the teens would be met with resistance in the community where police are not seen positively. Other youth from this same community noted that they did not want parents involved in addressing violence. They wanted a place where they would have a sense of belonging and be accepted for who they are. In both communities, the youth did not feel support from town council in terms of working toward a solution for dealing with violence among youth.

To effectively address bullying, the participants believed that the communities needed to accept that it was occurring. However, educational sessions related to bullying, including its effects, were suggested as necessary. Developing a program involving both perpetrators and victims was described as a means for assisting the perpetrator to understand the impact of bullying. Even though youth did not feel it was always appropriate to go to school counselors for assistance, they were seen as good resources for providing talks and information about bullying.

Surveillance cameras were used in the school hallways in one of the communities and were positively supported by the participants. Having security guards in the hallways was mentioned by these participants as another step worth considering. It was also perceived that the school personnel needed to present a unified vision for addressing issues such as bullying.

Youth who are involved in violence were seen as having personal problems from their inability to deal with anger and from their lowered self-esteem or poor self-image. For these individuals, assistance through anger management courses was suggested. Other ideas included offering courses to build the self-esteem of the victims and to help them cope with being bullied.

# Discussion

The youth who were interviewed in this study were very articulate about their lives in rural communities; they made candid comments about their lack of interest in remaining in their rural communities. Life within these communities was often described as 'boring' with little interest demonstrated about issues being faced by youth from local elected politicians. The youth described themselves as feeling disconnected from their communities. It was common in the interviews for the youth to note that they did not feel well understood by adults, including teachers and parents; they believed that local rural policy makers were not interested in their opinions or involvement. These perceptions are further supported by the low number of local people who attended the community presentations, despite the media campaigns and letters of invitation that were sent to a broad range of individuals and agencies in both of the communities. Community development processes that provide opportunities for youth to become engaged in and connected to their communities are an essential first step before moving on to more community-specific solutions to prevent and deal with violence[12].

Hosting local policy forums on youth violence that include town council members, youth, non-governmental organizations, and health and social service agencies with a professional facilitator is one way in which local solutions are generated for local concerns. In order for such forums to be successful, rural policy makers such as town councils need to acknowledge that the youths' perspectives are important and need consideration, and youth need to commit to being involved in the process. One of the main issues to be discussed at the forums is that violence is a symptom of a larger problem such as social isolation or differing values. A necessary outcome of the forums is policies and related strategies at the individual, family and community levels to attend to all facets of violence. Thus, activities to address

youth boredom are as important as appropriate counseling for victims or perpetrators and their families. One possible strategy is the creation of a community-wide coalition group with youth representation that implements yearly activities and strategies to be proactive and prevent violence or curtail it from worsening.

The participants not only believed that violence was an issue in their communities but also that it is different in rural settings. They perceived that urban areas have more gang-oriented violence in contrast to rural communities. They also believed that in urban areas, alcohol and drug problems occur more frequently and, consequently, a natural increase in violent activities follows. Additional research that generates information about these perceptions would allow for urban-rural comparisons regarding youth violence.

Seeking help for being a victim or perpetrator of violence becomes especially challenging in rural communities. The resources listed by the participants were not accessed which may, in part, be due to the nature of rural communities, where preserving anonymity and privacy are difficult. Different methods of assistance such as telehealth counseling to assist rural youth who are victims and perpetrators needs consideration to attend to the concerns the participants expressed regarding the lack of confidentiality in their community.

Even though there was considerable discussion about physical violence, the participants emphasized that the most harmful type of violence was psychological because it causes emotional scars that are harder to heal. It was perceived that bullying is occurring at a younger age and focused on youth who were seen as 'different' from the main group. Being a bully provided power and helped the bully to control others through activities such as having their homework done by the victims.

Not only do youth view violence as having victims but they spoke with great sensitivity on how the perpetrators of violent behaviors need to be understood and offered help. The participants were very concerned about the impact of violence on their peers and did not solely view individuals as the cause of bullying and other types of violence. In addition, it is critical for family members to be partners in addressing violence. Thus, improving communication patterns and relationships within families was considered to be a key factor in addressing violence.

# Acknowledgements

# References

1. Kulig J, Hall B, Kalischuk GR. *Violence among rural youth: a focus on health interim report: phase I*. Lethbridge, AB: University of Lethbridge, 2003.

2. du Plessis V, Beshiri R, Bollman R, Clemenson H. Definitions of rural. *Rural and Small Town Analysis Bulleltin* 2001; 3: Catalogue #21-006-XIE. Ottawa: Statistics Canada. (Online). Available: http://www.statcan.ca/english/research/21-601-MIE/21-601-MIE2002061.htm (Accessed 31 January 2006).

3. Strauss M, Gelles R. How violent are American families? Estimates from the National Family Violence Resurvey and other studies. In: D Hotaling, JT Finkelhor, MA Kirkpatrick (Eds). *Strauss Family abuse and its consequences: new directions in research*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1988; 14-37.

4. Arbor A. What do kids say about bullying? *The Education Digest* 1993; 58: 16-23.

5. Federal/Provincial/Territorial Advisory Committee on Population Health. *The opportunity of adolescence: the health sector contribution*. Ottawa: Health Canada, 2000.

6. Caputo T. *Hearing the voices of youth: A review of research and consultation documents*. Ottawa: Health Canada,1999.

7. Kulig J Nahachewsky D, Hall B, Kalischuk R. Rural youth violence: it is a public health concern! *Canadian Journal of Public Heath* 2005, 96: 357-359.

8. Lai D. Violence exposure and mental health of adolescents in small towns: An exploratory study. *Canadian Journal of Public Health* 1999; 90: 181-185.

9. Slovak K, Singer M. Gun violence exposure and trauma among rural youth. *Violence & Victims* 2001; 16: 389-400.

10. Newman K, Harding C, Mehta J, Roth W. *Rampage: The Social Roots of School Shootings*. New York: Basic Books, 2004.

11. Lincoln YS, Guba EG. But is it rigorous? Trustworthiness and authenticity in naturalistic evaluation. *New Directions for Program Evaluation* 1986; 30: 73-99.

12. University of New Hampshire. *Community Profiles*. (Online) 2004. http://ceinfo.unh.edu/CommDev/CommProf.htm (Accessed 20 January 2006).