
Peer Violence in Primary and Secondary Schools in the Maribor Police Directorate Area: Prevalence, Consequences, and the Role of Schools and the Police

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Purpose:

The article examines peer violence in primary and secondary schools located in the area of the Maribor Police Directorate. Focus is given to identifying the prevalence, forms and perceptions of peer violence, along with analysing the way pupils and students evaluate the role of schools and the police in addressing and preventing such violence. The school environment is shown to be the main setting in which peer violence occurs and also where preventive measures can be most effective.

Methods:

The study was conducted using a quantitative survey method. The sample comprised pupils from the final three grades of primary schools and students from secondary schools in the area of the Maribor Police Directorate. The collected data were analysed using basic descriptive statistical methods, which provide insights into the frequency of peer violence, perceptions of violence, and how the participants viewed the way it is managed in the school environment.

Findings:

Peer violence is relatively common in the school environment. Verbal violence was identified as the most frequent form, followed by physical and online violence, with multiple forms often being simultaneous. Peer violence was shown to most frequently occur among classmates, whereas pupils and students generally do not directly become involved when witnessing violence, and instead report the incident to an adult or move away from the situation. In addition, a reduced sense of safety in schools was revealed, and a critical assessment made of how effective school-based measures are at preventing peer violence.

Research limitations/implications:

The study is based on a non-probability sample and online data collection, which limits the generalisability of the findings to a broader population. Nevertheless, the sample size allows for a robust analysis of patterns in pupils' and students' views on and attitudes concerning peer violence in the regional context under study.

Practical implications:

The findings increase understanding of peer violence in primary and secondary schools in the Maribor Police Directorate area. The results may be compared with findings for other regions in Slovenia and could provide a basis for making preventive activities carried out by schools and the police more effective.

Originality/value:

The article presents an empirical study on peer violence in the school environment in which the responses of pupils and students, together with the role of institutions, was examined with respect to responding to peer violence. The findings contribute to the field of security studies by expanding knowledge concerning effective approaches to protecting children and adolescents from peer violence.

Keywords: peer violence, school environment, prevention, child protection, police

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Medvrstniško nasilje v osnovnih in srednjih šolah na območju Policijske uprave Maribor: razširjenost, posledice ter vloga šol in policije

Namen prispevka:

Prispevek obravnava pojav medvrstniškega nasilja v osnovnih in srednjih šolah na območju Policijske uprave Maribor. Raziskovalni problem je usmerjen v ugotavljanje razširjenosti, oblik in zaznav medvrstniškega nasilja ter v analizo ocen učencev in dijakov glede vloge šole in policije pri njegovem obravnavanju in preprečevanju. Raziskava se osredotoča na šolsko okolje kot osrednji prostor, kjer se nasilje najpogosteje pojavlja in kjer imajo preventivni ukrepi največji vpliv.

Metode:

Raziskava je bila izvedena z uporabo kvantitativne metode anketnega vprašalnika. V raziskavo so bili vključeni učenci zadnje triade osnovnih šol ter dijaki srednjih šol na območju Policijske uprave Maribor. Zbrani podatki so bili analizirani z uporabo osnovnih deskriptivnih statističnih metod, kar je omogočilo vpogled v pogostost pojavov medvrstniškega nasilja, zaznave nasilja ter stališča sodelujočih glede njegove obravnave v šolskem okolju.

Ugotovitve:

Rezultati raziskave kažejo, da je medvrstniško nasilje v šolskem okolju razmeroma pogosto. Najpogostejša oblika nasilja je verbalno nasilje, sledijo fizične in spletne oblike, pri čemer se nasilje pogosto pojavlja v kombinaciji več oblik hkrati. Ugotovljeno je bilo, da se nasilje najpogosteje pojavlja med vrstniki ter da se učenci in dijaki ob zaznavi nasilja večinoma ne odločajo za neposredno posredovanje, temveč o dogodkih obveščajo odrasle ali se iz situacije umaknejo. Raziskava je pokazala tudi zmanjšan občutek varnosti v šolskem okolju ter kritično oceno učinkovitosti šolskih ukrepov za preprečevanje medvrstniškega nasilja.

Omejitve/uporabnost raziskave:

Raziskava temelji na neverjetnostnem vzorcu in spletnem načinu zbiranja podatkov, zato rezultatov ni mogoče neposredno posploševati na celotno populacijo učencev in dijakov. Kljub temu obseg vzorca omogoča zanesljivo analizo vzorcev zaznav in odnosov do medvrstniškega nasilja v obravnavanem regijskem okolju.

Praktična uporabnost:

Ugotovitve prispevajo k boljšemu razumevanju razširjenosti in oblik medvrstniškega nasilja v osnovnih in srednjih šolah na območju Policijske uprave Maribor. Posamezne ugotovitve omogočajo primerjavo z rezultati raziskav v drugih slovenskih regijah ter lahko služijo kot podlaga za izboljšanje preventivnih dejavnosti šol in policije.

Izvirnost/pomembnost prispevka:

Prispevek predstavlja empirično raziskavo o medvrstniškem nasilju v šolskem okolju in obravnava odzivanje učencev in dijakov ter vlogo institucij pri preprečevanju in obravnavi tovrstnega nasilja. S tem prispeva k razvoju varstvoslovnega znanja na področju zaščite otrok in mladostnikov.

Ključne besede: medvrstniško nasilje, šolsko okolje, preventiva, varstvo otrok, policija

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1 INTRODUCTION

Peer violence is widely recognised as one of the greatest threats to children's safety and well-being to the safety and well-being of children and adolescents. It can appear in various forms, including verbal, physical, social and online violence, and its consequences may have its consequences may have substantial effects on psychosocial development, mental health, and a sense of safety within the school environment. As a setting of daily social interactions among children and adolescents, schools constitute the environment in which peer violence most often happens, yet it is also a space in which preventive and intervention measures can be most effective (Olweus, 1993; Espelage & Swearer, 2010; World Health Organization [WHO], 2020). Schools also have a fundamental duty of care

to provide a safe learning environment and to protect children and adolescents from physical, psychological, and social harm.

In recent years, the issue of peer violence has been addressed ever more within a broader security and prevention framework. Research indicates that violence among peers should not be understood as simply an educational issue, but in addition as a matter of safety and institutional responsibility (Espelage & Swearer, 2010; WHO, 2020). Apart from schools and social welfare services, the police play an important role in addressing and preventing peer violence, notably via preventive activities, cooperation with educational institutions, and interventions when cases are more serious (WHO, 2020).

Despite a growing body of Slovenian research on peer violence (e.g., Pečjak, 2014), several questions remain regarding its prevalence, forms, and perceptions in specific regional contexts, as well as regarding the effectiveness of existing preventive measures. It is particularly important to understand how pupils and students experience violence in the school environment, the way they respond to it, and their assessment of the role of schools and the police in preventing and managing it. The mentioned insights permit more targeted and effective preventive approaches to be developed based on young people's actual experiences and perceptions. The focus on the Maribor Police Directorate area is a response to the lack of systematic, regional-level empirical data on peer violence, which is a notable gap in existing research.

The purpose of this article is to examine peer violence in primary and secondary schools located in the area of the Maribor Police Directorate, and analyse its prevalence, forms and perceptions among pupils and students. Special attention is paid to the role of schools and the police in addressing and preventing peer violence, coupled with the assessment of perceived safety in the school environment. The article is based on an empirical study and contributes a more refined understanding of peer violence in a regional context, as well as to the development of preventive approaches in the field of child and adolescent protection.

2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Around the world, peer violence has become a pressing public health, educational and social issue. According to the WHO (2020) and United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO] (2019), between one-fifth and one-third of children and adolescents report having been involved in bullying as either a victim, perpetrator or bystander during their school years. Beyond the immediate consequences, peer violence is associated with poorer academic achievement, reduced school engagement, mental health problems, and long-term psychosocial difficulties. The mentioned findings have led research attention to move from describing individual violent incidents toward understanding broader social, organisational and environmental factors that influence violence in school settings. Contemporary prevention strategies thus stress the creation of a positive school climate, supportive peer relationships, and coordinated cooperation among the school, families, and external institutions.

2.1 Defining Peer Violence in the School Environment

Peer violence is a complex social phenomenon, which refers to repeated forms of violent behaviour among children and adolescents in which an imbalance of power exists between perpetrator and victim. In the literature, peer violence is most commonly defined as the intentional inflicting of physical, psychological or social harm on a peer, where violent acts are repeated or have the potential to be repeated (Olweus, 1993; Smith, 2014). Although Olweus' definition is still the most widely accepted conceptual framework, more recent research shows peer violence should be understood as a multidimensional social phenomenon more than mere repeated aggressive behaviour. Contemporary studies highlight the interaction of individual characteristics, peer group dynamics, family environment, school climate, and digital communication, which all contribute to the occurrence and persistence of bullying. This broader perspective is especially valuable because modern forms of peer violence occur increasingly in both physical and virtual environments, making early recognition and coordinated intervention more challenging (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2019; WHO, 2020). Such behaviour may occur directly or indirectly, and often brings long-term consequences for all individuals involved (Espelage & Swearer, 2010).

The school environment is a specific social setting in which peer violence happens relatively frequently. Focus on this setting is largely due to the intensive daily social interactions, the forming of social hierarchies, and limited opportunities for withdrawing from conflict situations (Pečjak, 2014; Thornberg, 2015). Schools are therefore not only educational institutions; at the same time, they are environments in which relationships of power, belonging and exclusion are established, creating conditions that may lead to violent behaviour among peers.

Contemporary research makes it clear that peer violence should not be understood solely as an individual form of deviant behaviour, but as a phenomenon closely linked to broader social and institutional contexts. Factors such as school characteristics, pupil-teacher relationships, classroom climate, and institutional responses to violence significantly influence its occurrence (Sullivan et al., 2005; Espelage & Swearer, 2010). This makes understanding peer violence within the school environment essential for developing effective preventive and intervention measures.

For the purposes of this article, peer violence is defined as any form of repeated or systematic violent behaviour among pupils and students in the school environment that causes physical, psychological or social harm, and negatively affects an individual's sense of safety and well-being (Olweus, 1993; WHO, 2020).

2.2 Forms of Peer Violence

Peer violence in the school environment can take various forms that vary by their manifestation, intensity, and impacts for the victim. Research suggests that violence among peers rarely emerges in a single form and instead more commonly entails a combination of different forms of violent behaviour (Pečjak, 2014; Smith,

2014). Understanding the varied forms of peer violence is vital for recognising and effectively preventing them.

The most common form of peer violence is verbal, which includes name-calling, insults, threats, humiliation, and the spreading of rumours. Even though verbal violence is often less visible than physical violence, it may hold considerable negative effects for victims' self-esteem, emotional stability, and sense of safety (Olweus, 1993; Espelage & Swearer, 2010). The prevalence of verbal violence sees it frequently being normalised, which further complicates detecting and appropriately responding to it.

Physical violence involves direct forms of aggressive behaviour such as hitting, kicking, pushing and other physical attacks. Despite being less frequent than verbal violence, physical violence typically causes more immediate and visible consequences and often requires prompt intervention by adults or institutions (Smith et al., 2018). In the school context, physical violence is generally treated as a more serious violation and often associated with other, less visible forms of violence.

Another important form of peer violence is relational or social violence, which includes exclusion, ignoring, the manipulating of social relationships, and deliberate undermining of an individual's social status. Many times, it is a more difficult form of violence to detect, yet it can have lasting negative effects on social inclusion and psychological well-being among children and adolescents (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Pečjak, 2014).

Sexual violence is yet another crucial form of peer violence. This form includes unwanted sexual comments, sexual harassment, coercion, inappropriate touching, or other forms of non-consensual sexual behaviour among peers. It is characterised by the absence of consent and can involve elements of pressure, intimidation, or abuse of power. While it is less frequently reported than other forms of peer violence, it is a serious form of victimisation holding significant psychological and emotional consequences for children and adolescents (WHO, 2020).

In recent years, attention has been increasingly paid to cyber violence, which is carried out through digital technologies and social media. Cyber violence represents a distinct form of peer violence since it transcends the spatial and temporal boundaries of the school environment and enables a wider audience and greater anonymity for the perpetrators (Kowalski et al., 2019). These characteristics mean cyber violence can cause particularly serious consequences for the victims.

According to UNESCO (2019), the WHO (2020) and the OECD (2019), verbal and relational forms of peer violence continue to be the most frequently reported forms of bullying among school-aged children, whereas cyberbullying is ever more prominent following widespread use of digital communication and social media. These reports also reveal that different forms of peer violence frequently overlap, and hence victims are often exposed to several forms of victimising simultaneously rather than a one-off isolated form.

2.3 Consequences of Peer Violence for Children and Adolescents

Peer violence can have multiple negative consequences for children and adolescents, affecting them on psychological, social and educational levels. Research consistently shows exposure to violence in the school environment elevates the risk of emotional distress, lowers the sense of safety, and can be responsible for long-term negative effects on individual well-being (Espelage & Swearer, 2010; Moore et al., 2014).

On the psychological level, victims of peer violence are more frequently exposed to stress, anxiety, depressive symptoms, and lower self-esteem. Prolonged exposure to violence may lead to feelings of helplessness, social withdrawal, and reduced trust in peers and adults (Olweus, 1993; Arseneault, 2017). Negative consequences are not limited to the victims alone and can also affect perpetrators as well as bystanders indirectly involved in violent situations.

On the social level, peer violence affects the quality of interpersonal relationships, social inclusion, and the sense of belonging in the school environment. Victims often experience exclusion, stigmatisation, and lower peer support, which further adds to the risk of social isolation (Pečjak, 2014; Thornberg, 2015). These experiences may produce long-term effects on the development of social skills and the forming of healthy relationships later on in life.

Peer violence can also have significant educational outcomes. Studies indicate that pupils and students exposed to violence are more likely to be absent from school, achieve lower academic performance, and demonstrate less motivation for schoolwork (Juvonen et al., 2011). A diminished sense of safety in the school environment may lead to a generally negative perception of school and increase the risk of early school dropout.

From a security studies perspective, the consequences of peer violence are noteworthy since they influence both subjective and objective perceptions of safety within the school environment. A school perceived to be an unsafe space cannot effectively fulfil its educational and protective functions. Understanding the after-effects of peer violence is thus a key foundation for the development of preventive strategies and effective cooperation between schools, the police, and other institutions in protecting your people.

Recent reports published by UNESCO (2019), the OECD (2019) and the WHO (2020) emphasise that peer violence should be understood within a broader ecological framework. These reports demonstrate that school climate, teacher–student relationships, clearly defined behavioural expectations, and active parental involvement have a substantial influence on both the occurrence of peer violence and the effectiveness of prevention strategies. This perspective underscores that sustainable prevention calls for coordinated action involving schools, families, local communities, and public institutions.

2.4 The Role of Institutions in Addressing Peer Violence

The effective prevention and management of peer violence require the cooperation of multiple institutions that play different yet complementary roles in the school environment. Core actors include schools, parents, social welfare services, and the

police, which all share responsibility for ensuring a safe environment for children and adolescents (Pečjak, 2014; Sullivan et al., 2005). Interinstitutional cooperation is especially important when complex and recurring forms of peer violence are being addressed.

Schools play a central role in the early identification of peer violence and implementing of preventive and intervention measures. By fostering a positive school climate, establishing clear behavioural rules, and responding consistently to identified incidents of violence, schools can contribute significantly to lowering violent behaviour among student peers (Thornberg, 2015; Smith et al., 2018). Trust between pupils and school staff is a crucial factor because it influences young people's willingness to report violence and seek support.

Rather than acting as the leading educational agents in addressing peer violence, the police hold an important preventive and protective role. These activities include implementing preventive programmes in schools, cooperating with educational institutions, providing educational activities, and intervening in cases involving serious or criminal forms of violence. (Sullivan et al., 2005). Police involvement in preventive initiatives may enhance young people's sense of safety and increase their awareness of the outcomes of violent behaviour.

Alongside schools and the police, social welfare services play an important role in supporting children and adolescents at risk and providing assistance to victims and their families. Effective responses to peer violence require coordinated action among all institutions involved given that isolated measures are generally insufficient for achieving long-term reductions in violence (WHO, 2020).

From a security studies perspective, it is essential to recognise that preventive approaches are based on trust, cooperation, and a clear division of responsibilities among institutions. Only through coordinated efforts by schools, the police, and other relevant institutions can a safe school environment be established, assuring comprehensive protection of children and adolescents and effective responses to peer violence (Sullivan et al., 2005; WHO, 2020).

Previous research consistently reveals peer violence is a multifaceted phenomenon influenced by individual, interpersonal, organisational and societal factors. Although numerous international studies have examined the prevalence and consequences of peer violence, considerably less attention has been devoted to regional studies exploring students' perceptions of violence and the roles of schools and police in specific local contexts. The presented study seeks to address this gap by investigating peer violence among primary and secondary school students in the Maribor Police Directorate area and assessing how the students view the institutional responses to that violence.

Besides consequences for individual victims, peer violence can negatively affect the wider school environment by reducing students' sense of safety, trust and belonging. Schools characterised by frequent incidents of peer violence often experience lower academic engagement, weaker interpersonal relationships, and reduced confidence in institutional responses. Preventing peer violence should accordingly be seen not just as a child protection issue but also as an essential component of a healthy educational organisation.

Evidence summarised by UNESCO (2019), the WHO (2020) and the OECD (2019) indicates that the most effective prevention programmes combine universal school-wide prevention with targeted interventions for pupils at increased risk. These approaches stress continuous monitoring, staff training, student participation, and close cooperation between schools, families, police, and other community stakeholders.

3 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

The study is based on a quantitative research approach aimed at obtaining systematic insight into the prevalence, forms and perceptions of peer violence in the school environment. A quantitative method enables the collection of data from a larger number of participants and allows for the comparison of perceptions and attitudes of pupils and students concerning the phenomenon under investigation. This research approach is particularly suitable for examining issues related to frequency, perceptions and behavioural patterns within a population. The study focused on pupils and students in the final years of primary and secondary education.

The research was designed as a cross-sectional study since data were collected at a single point in time. Such a research design permits the analysis of the current state and perceptions of peer violence and comparisons between different groups of participants. Although cross-sectional studies do not allow for the identification of causal relationships, they are appropriate for describing phenomena and identifying key trends, which was the primary aim of the study.

A survey method using a structured questionnaire was employed as the main research method. The survey approach was selected due to its efficiency with collecting data on experiences, perceptions and attitudes from a higher number of individuals. In the context of researching peer violence, surveys also enable relatively anonymous reporting of experiences, which may contribute to greater honesty in participants' responses.

The research design was developed with the aim of obtaining empirical data that would enable an understanding of the prevalence of peer violence and the role of schools and the police in actively responding to such violence in a regional context. The mentioned approach provides an appropriate foundation for the subsequent analysis of the results and the formulating of recommendations in the areas of prevention and institutional response.

3.2 Sample and Research Setting

The target population consisted of pupils in the final three grades of primary schools (aged approximately 10–15) and students in secondary schools (aged approximately 15–18 and above) within the Maribor Police Directorate area. The study was conducted in the area of the Maribor Police Directorate, which is one

of the bigger and more demographically diverse regions in Slovenia. The regional context includes both urban and rural environments together with various types of primary and secondary schools, enabling comprehensive insight into peer violence in the eastern part of the country. The selected research setting therefore constitutes a relevant regional setting for examining peer violence in the school environment.

The sampling frame included primary and secondary schools in the selected area. School principals were invited to participate in the study, and the schools of those who agreed voluntarily were included in the sample. In total, three primary schools and four secondary schools participated. A non-probability, convenience sampling approach was used, with participation depending on the voluntary agreement of schools and respondents. This approach allowed for the collection of data from participants willing to share their experiences and perceptions of peer violence.

A total of 362 valid questionnaires was collected. Among these, 147 respondents (41%) were primary school pupils and 193 (53%) were secondary school students, while 22 participants (6%) selected the option "other". The gender distribution was 48% female and 35% male, with 6% of participants identifying as other and 12% not providing an answer. The age structure of the sample showed that 54% of participants were aged between 16 and 18, 39% between 10 and 15, and 6% were 19 years or older. The structure of the sample enabled analysis of perceptions and experiences of peer violence across different age groups as well as comparisons between primary and secondary school populations. This made it possible to examine differences in the prevalence and forms of violence, and in views concerning the handling of violence in the school environment.

Even though the sample does not allow for the findings to be directly generalised to the entire population of pupils and students in Slovenia, its size and diversity enable a reliable analysis of patterns of perceptions and behaviours in the examined regional context. The regional approach namely provides a better understanding of local characteristics of peer violence and also an appropriate basis for comparisons with other Slovenian regions in future research.

3.3 Data Collection Procedure

Data were collected using an online questionnaire created in the 1KA application. Participating schools received a link to the questionnaire, which was distributed to pupils and students. Use of an online survey enabled efficient data collection from a greater number of participants and facilitated access to the target population of pupils and students. The survey was conducted during a single time period, which is consistent with the cross-sectional research design. Data were collected between May and October 2025. Due to lower response rates during the summer months, the data collection period was extended accordingly.

Participation in the study was voluntary, and respondents were informed about the purpose of the research, the anonymity of participation, and their right to withdraw from the study at any time prior to completing the questionnaire. The survey did not include any questions that would allow for the identification of

individual participants or schools, thereby ensuring anonymity and the protection of personal data.

Fundamental ethical principles of research were respected while implementing the study, notably the principles of voluntary participation, informed consent, and data protection. Close attention was paid to the fact that the study involved minors. The questionnaire was hence designed in a manner that did not unnecessarily intrude upon participants' privacy or cause psychological distress, particularly among those who had previously experienced peer violence. The collected data were used exclusively for research purposes and analysed on an aggregated level. In this way, the data collection procedure enabled the acquisition of relevant empirical information on perceptions and experiences of peer violence while assuring ethical compliance and protection of the research participants.

3.4 Research Instrument

The research instrument was a structured questionnaire developed following a review of relevant literature on peer violence and adapted to the target population of pupils and students. The questionnaire was designed to capture key information regarding the participants' experiences, perceptions and attitudes regarding peer violence in the school environment.

The questionnaire consisted of 12 substantive questions related to experiences, perceptions and forms of peer violence, alongside three demographic questions. The questionnaire was divided into several thematic sections. Some questions allowed multiple responses, enabling more comprehensive insight into the phenomenon under study. The first section included basic demographic questions, permitting the participants to be classified by age group and level of education. The second section focused on experiences with peer violence, including perceptions of its frequency and the identification of different forms of violent behaviour. The third section addressed perceptions of safety in the school environment and participants' responses while witnessing or experiencing violence.

One section of the questionnaire was dedicated to assessing the role of schools and the police in addressing and preventing peer violence. Participants evaluated the effectiveness of the existing measures and expressed their views on institutional responses to violence in the school environment. The majority of questions were formulated as closed-ended items using Likert-type scales, allowing for quantitative analysis of perceptions and attitudes.

The questionnaire was designed to be clear and easy to understand and adapted to the age of the participants. The described structure of the research instrument enabled the collection of comparable data, which served as the basis for analysing the prevalence of peer violence and understanding views on the role of institutions in the regional context examined.

3.5 Data Analysis

The collected data were analysed using descriptive statistical methods, including frequency distributions and percentage analysis. The analysis focused on presenting the frequency of individual phenomena, the distributions of

responses, and participants' perceptions and attitudes regarding peer violence in the school environment. The results are presented in the form of frequencies and percentages, facilitating a clear overview of the prevalence of violence and the participants' responses.

Attention was paid to comparisons of the different participant groups, notably between the primary school pupils and the secondary school students. In this way, it was possible to identify potential differences in perceptions of peer violence, the sense of safety, and evaluations of the role of schools and the police in addressing peer violence.

The data analysis was conducted with the aim of describing and understanding the phenomenon under investigation rather than identifying causal relationships. The selected analytical approach is consistent with the objectives of the present study and allows for the findings to be interpreted within a security studies and prevention-oriented framework. Results of the analysis are presented below.

4 RESULTS - INTRODUCTORY SECTION

In this section, key findings of the empirical study on peer violence in primary and secondary schools in the area of the Maribor Police Directorate are described. The results are based on analysis of responses from 362 pupils and students and are presented descriptively, with the goal of illustrating the prevalence of peer violence, perceptions of various forms of violent behaviour, and participants' attitudes concerning the management and prevention of peer violence in the school environment.

The presentation of results is structured by thematic sections that reflect the structure of the survey questionnaire. First, findings related to the prevalence and frequency of peer violence are presented, followed by results on the perceived forms of violence and participants' responses while witnessing or experiencing violent incidents. Findings related to the sense of safety in the school environment are then outlined before the evaluations made of the role of schools and the police in addressing and preventing peer violence are presented.

The results are set out using tables and figures which provide a clear overview of the distribution of responses and allow for comparisons between different participant groups. In this section, the findings are reported without in-depth interpretation, which is left for the discussion section of the article.

4.1 Prevalence and Frequency of Peer Violence

The results indicate that peer violence is a relatively widespread phenomenon in the school environment in the area of the Maribor Police Directorate. The majority of participating pupils and students reported having encountered peer violence during their schooling as either a victim, perpetrator or bystander.

The proportion of pupils and students who reported having an experience with peer violence is displayed in Figure 1. The findings show that 70% of participants reported having experienced peer violence, while 30% indicated they had no such experience. This distribution reveals peer violence is present among

a large share of the participants. More detailed analysis of frequency indicates peer violence is most commonly perceived as occurring occasionally. Around one-fifth of the participants reported frequent or very frequent occurrences. Secondary school students reported higher levels of perceived violence.

A comparison between the primary school pupils and secondary school students disclosed certain differences in perceptions of the prevalence of peer violence. Although secondary school students generally reported higher levels of perceived violence, peer violence was reported in both educational settings.

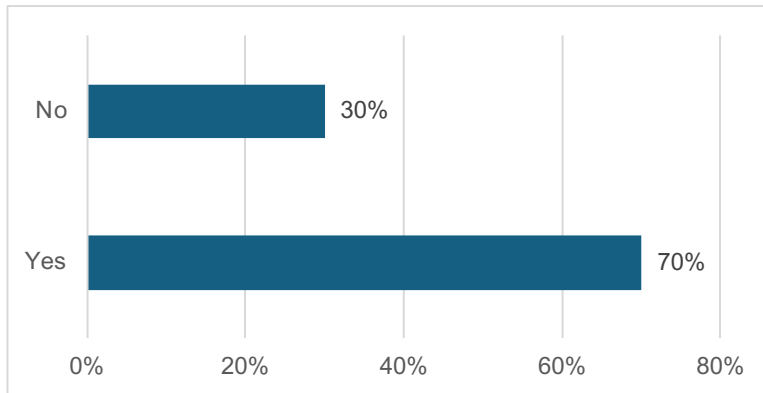


Figure 1
*Proportion
of Pupils and
Students with
Experience of Peer
Violence*

The findings generally show that peer violence is present to a considerable extent in the school environment. These results establish a basis for further analysis of specific forms of peer violence and the participants' responses to violent incidents.

4.2 Forms of Peer Violence

Results concerning perceived forms of peer violence in the school environment are presented in this section. Participants reported having experienced various forms of violent behaviour, with the findings showing that different forms of peer violence often overlapped and occurred simultaneously.

An overview of perceived forms of peer violence is given in Table 1. Peer violence is rarely limited to a single form, but typically involves a combination of different behaviours.

Verbal violence was identified as the most frequently perceived form of peer violence, including insults, name-calling, humiliation, and the spreading of rumours. Verbal violence was reported by the majority of participants.

While physical violence was reported less frequently, it still constituted a noteworthy form of peer violence. Participants described experiences entailing hitting, pushing and other forms of physical aggression, which typically resulted in more immediate and visible consequences. Physical violence was generally seen to be a more serious form of violence, often leading to greater involvement of adults or institutions.

Table 1
*Perceived Forms
of Peer Violence
in the School
Environment (n
= 362)*

Form of violence	Number of respondents	Percentage of respondents (%)
Physical violence (fights, hitting, pushing)	131	36
Verbal violence (insults, mocking, threats)	194	54
Cyber violence (offensive comments, spreading false information, exclusion on social media)	97	27
Sexual violence (unwanted touching, sending inappropriate images or content)	74	20
Social exclusion	36	10
Other	26	7

Note. Participants could select more than one answer; therefore, the total percentage exceeds 100%.

A considerable proportion of participants also reported experiences with relational or social violence, such as exclusion, ignoring, or the deliberate undermining of an individual's social position. Even though this form of violence is often less noticeable, it may have significant long-term effects on pupils' and students' sense of belonging and social inclusion.

Cyber violence was identified as an increasingly prevalent form of peer violence that extends beyond the spatial and temporal boundaries of the school environment. Participants reported experiences involving offensive messages, the dissemination of inappropriate content, and other forms of technology-mediated violence. The presence of cyber violence further highlights that peer violence has expanded to the virtual sphere.

Overall, the results indicate that peer violence appears in multiple forms, with verbal violence being the most prevalent, while other forms occurring to a smaller, albeit still significant extent. Such diversity of violent behaviours provides an important basis for understanding the complexity of peer violence and for further analysis of pupils' and students' responses to violent incidents.

4.3 Responses to Peer Violence

This section presents findings related to pupils' and students' responses while witnessing or experiencing peer violence in the school environment. An overview of the pupils' and students' responses to peer violence is displayed in Table 2. The analysis indicates that participants respond to violent incidents in different ways, with passive responses or indirect forms of action being the most prevalent.

The most frequent response to peer violence was reporting the incident to an adult, in particular teachers, school counsellors, or parents.

Response to peer violence	Number of respondents	Percentage of respondents (%)
I intervene and help the victim	66	18
I report it to a teacher or the school counselling service	142	39
I inform my parents	149	41
I do nothing	144	40
Other	36	10

Table 2
Responses of Pupils and Students to Peer Violence (n = 362)

Note. Participants could select more than one answer; therefore, the total percentage exceeds 100%.

A considerable share of participants also reported withdrawing from the situation or observing violent incidents without actively intervening. A substantial proportion of participants reported passive responses. Direct intervention in violent situations was reported less frequently, indicating that active peer involvement in resolving violent conflicts is not a dominant behavioural pattern.

The results further reveal differences in responses between age groups. Secondary school students reported passive responses more often than primary school pupils, while younger participants were more likely to seek help from adults. The mentioned differences highlight the role of developmental and social factors in shaping responses to peer violence.

As a whole, the findings suggest that pupils and students tend to rely more on indirect responses or withdrawal while confronted with peer violence. This gives an important basis for further consideration of the effectiveness of preventive programmes and the promotion of more active and constructive responses within the school environment.

4.4 Perceived Safety in the School Environment

In this section, findings regarding to pupils' and students' perceived sense of safety in the school environment are presented. Perceived safety is an important indicator of the quality of the school environment, and closely linked to the prevalence of peer violence and individuals' responses to violent incidents.

The results indicate that not all participants feel equally safe in the school environment. A considerable share reported a reduced sense of safety. Participants who reported passive responses also reported lower levels of perceived safety.

A comparison of the primary school pupils and secondary school students revealed differences in perceived safety. Secondary school students generally reported lower levels of perceived safety compared to primary school pupils. Such differences could be related to developmental characteristics, social dynamics, and greater exposure to violent situations in the school environment.

The findings further show that perceived safety is also related to responses to peer violence. Participants who reported passive responses or moving away from violent situations were more likely to express lower levels of perceived safety in the school environment. This suggests that a perceived lack of ability to influence violent events may contribute to feelings of insecurity.

The findings generally demonstrate that perceived safety in the school environment cannot be taken for granted and is closely linked to the prevalence of peer violence and the ways in which individuals respond to it. These results provide a basis for further discussion of the role of schools and the police in ensuring a safe school environment.

4.5 Evaluation of the Role of Schools and the Police

This section presents findings related to participants' evaluations of the role of schools and the police in addressing and preventing peer violence in the school environment. Participants expressed their views on the effectiveness of institutional measures and the level of support they perceive when dealing with violent situations.

Participants were shown to generally recognise the school as an important actor in addressing peer violence. Schools were most often perceived as the main institution to which pupils and students turn when violence occurs. Still, a proportion of participants expressed reservations with the effectiveness and consistency of school-based measures.

The role of the police in addressing peer violence was perceived more cautiously than that of schools. Participants tended to view the police largely as an institution involved in more serious or repeated forms of violence, rather than as a preventive partner in everyday school life. Participants most often associated the police with more serious forms of violence.

Differences in perceptions of the role of schools and the police were also observed between the primary school pupils and secondary school students. Secondary school students more frequently expressed critical views concerning the effectiveness of institutional measures, which may be associated with their greater independence, experience, and more developed critical evaluation of institutional performance.

Taken together, the findings show that pupils and students recognise the importance of both schools and the police in addressing peer violence, but do not perceive their roles as being completely sufficient for preventing such behaviour. These results provide important grounds for discussing the strengthening of preventive activities, improving interinstitutional cooperation, and boosting the involvement of the police in preventive programmes in the school environment.

5 DISCUSSION

The presented study examined the prevalence and characteristics of peer violence in primary and secondary schools within the Maribor Police Directorate area and explored young persons' perceptions of school and police responses. The findings indicate that peer violence remains a significant challenge in the school environment despite the existing preventive activities. Overall, the results are broadly consistent with previous Slovenian research (Pečjak, 2014) and international research (Olweus, 1993; WHO, 2020). The outlined findings provide

additional evidence of students' views on institutional responses and perceived school safety within a regional Slovenian context.

The high proportion of participants who reported having an experience with peer violence suggests such behaviour is not limited to isolated incidents and instead is a recurring aspect of school life. This finding corresponds with earlier international research (Olweus, 1993; Smith, 2014; WHO, 2020), indicating that peer violence represents a recurring aspect of school life rather than being isolated incidents. The higher reported prevalence among secondary school students may be explained by their more complex social dynamics, increased exposure to diverse forms of interaction, and greater ability to recognise and interpret different manifestations of violent behaviour.

The analysis of different forms of peer violence revealed that verbal violence is the most prevalent form, followed by physical, cyber and sexual violence. The described pattern aligns with existing literature, which identifies verbal aggression as the most common form due to its relative invisibility and frequent normalisation in peer interactions (Olweus, 1993). Although less frequent, physical violence is typically perceived as more serious, which may explain why it more often results in intervention by adults or institutions. The presence of sexual violence, despite being reported by a smaller share of participants, is especially concerning since such experiences can hold profound psychological and emotional consequences (WHO, 2020).

The predominance of verbal violence identified in this study is consistent with previous international research indicating that verbal aggression continues to be the most frequently reported form of peer violence in schools (Olweus, 1993; WHO, 2020). Similar findings have also been reported by Pečjak (2014), suggesting that verbal aggression is often the initial stage of more complex patterns of peer victimisation.

The findings also shed light on the rising importance of cyber violence, which extends beyond the spatial and temporal boundaries of the school environment. This form of violence allows perpetrators to reach a wider audience and operate with greater anonymity, thereby intensifying its potential impact on victims (Kowalski et al., 2019). The coexistence of multiple forms of violence further supports the notion that peer violence is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that calls for comprehensive and coordinated responses.

With regard to responses to peer violence, the results show that pupils and students tend to rely mainly on indirect forms of action, such as reporting incidents to adults or withdrawing from the situation. Direct intervention was reported less frequently, suggesting that many young people may feel unprepared or reluctant to actively engage to resolve violent situations. This finding is consistent with research showing that fear of negative consequences, lack of confidence, and social pressures often discourage active bystander intervention (Espelage & Swearer, 2010).

Differences between age groups additionally suggest that developmental and social factors play an important role in shaping responses to peer violence. Younger pupils were more likely to seek help from adults, whereas secondary school students more often reported passive responses. This may reflect increasing

independence, as well as a stronger tendency among older students to handle situations within peer groups rather than involving authority figures.

The results about perceived safety in the school environment indicate that not all pupils and students feel equally safe, and that perceptions of safety are closely linked to experiences of violence and responses to it. Participants who reported passive responses or withdrawal also tended to express lower levels of perceived safety. The inability or unwillingness to act in situations of violence may thus contribute to a broader sense of insecurity within the school environment. Such findings support earlier research stressing the importance of a supportive and responsive school climate in promoting both safety and well-being (WHO, 2020).

The evaluation of the role of schools and the police reveals that pupils and students mostly perceive schools as the main institution responsible for addressing peer violence. At the same time, the role of the police was more often associated with serious or repeated incidents rather than preventive activities. Such a perception reflects a more reactive understanding of policing and suggests the preventive role of the police might not be sufficiently recognised among young people. Strengthening cooperation between schools and the police, particularly via preventive programmes and awareness-raising activities, could therefore contribute to more effective responses to peer violence.

Students' reduced sense of safety observed in the study is especially important because perceived school safety has repeatedly been identified as one of the strongest predictors of students' well-being, academic engagement, and overall school adjustment. Previous OECD (2019) and UNESCO (2019) reports demonstrated that students who perceive their school as unsafe are less likely to participate actively in school life and more likely to experience emotional distress.

Notwithstanding the valuable insights provided by this study, several limitations should be acknowledged. The use of a non-probability, convenience sample limits the generalisability of the findings to a broader population of pupils and students. In addition, the reliance on self-reported data may introduce bias related to social desirability or a subjective interpretation of experiences. The cross-sectional design further limits the ability to examine causal relationships between variables. Future research could address these limitations by employing longitudinal designs, larger and more representative samples, and mixed-method approaches.

The findings also reveal that students expect schools to play a proactive rather than reactive role in preventing peer violence. This supports contemporary whole-school prevention approaches described by UNESCO (2019) and the WHO (2020) in which school leadership, teachers, students and parents together contribute to establishing a positive school climate. Rather than focusing exclusively on disciplinary responses after violent incidents have occurred, effective prevention requires continuous educational activities aimed at strengthening respectful relationships and mutual trust.

Overall, the findings of this study highlight the need for systematic and coordinated efforts to address peer violence in the school environment. Effective prevention needs multiple actors to be involved, including schools, families and the police, as well as the development of strategies that promote active

and constructive responses among pupils and students. The results establish an important empirical basis for developing targeted preventive measures and strengthening institutional cooperation in the field of child and adolescent protection.

Moreover, the results suggest that students mainly perceive the police as an institution providing support in more serious cases rather than as the one of the main actors responsible for addressing peer violence. The described perception corresponds with the legal and institutional framework in Slovenia where schools retain the prime responsibility for addressing peer violence, while police intervention is generally reserved for incidents involving criminal offences or serious threats to safety.

Together, the findings reinforce previous evidence reported by UNESCO (2019), the WHO (2020) and the OECD (2019), demonstrating that peer violence cannot be effectively addressed in isolated interventions.

6 CONCLUSION

The study examined the prevalence, forms and perceptions of peer violence among primary and secondary school students in the Maribor Police Directorate area. Peer violence was shown to remain a significant issue in the school environment irrespective of the various preventive activities undertaken by schools and other institutions. The overall findings of this study are broadly consistent with previous Slovenian research (Pečjak, 2014) and international research (Olweus, 1993; WHO, 2020; UNESCO, 2019).

The findings confirm that peer violence is a noteworthy and widespread phenomenon in the school environment that impacts a substantial proportion of young people in various roles, including as a victim, perpetrator or bystander.

The study stresses that peer violence most frequently occurs in verbal form, even though other forms (including physical, cyber and sexual violence) are also present and contribute to the overriding complexity of the phenomenon. The results also show that pupils and students tend to respond to peer violence mainly with indirect or passive strategies, such as reporting incidents to an adult or moving away from the situation, while direct intervention remains relatively limited.

An important finding of this study is the relationship between experiences of peer violence, response patterns, and perceived safety in the school environment. Lower levels of perceived safety among participants indicate that peer violence not only affects direct victims but also shapes the broader school climate. Differences between the primary and secondary school students suggest that developmental and social factors influence both perceptions of violence and responses to it.

The findings also draw attention to the central role of schools as the key institution in addressing peer violence, whereas the role of the police is more commonly associated with serious or repeated incidents. The need to strengthen the preventive role of the police and enhance cooperation between educational institutions and law enforcement agencies is thus apparent.

Although the study is limited by the use of a non-probability sample, self-reported data, and a cross-sectional design, it provides valuable empirical insights into peer violence on the regional level. These findings help to better understand the phenomenon and offer the grounds for developing more targeted and effective preventive strategies.

An important contribution of the present study lies in providing empirical evidence from a specific regional context. While international studies conducted by Olweus (1993), the WHO (2020), UNESCO (2019) and the OECD (2019) describe the prevalence and characteristics of peer violence, fewer studies have simultaneously examined students' perceptions of both school and police responses within the same research framework. The findings therefore provide a stronger understanding of institutional responses to peer violence and may support with the development of more effective prevention strategies in Slovenian schools.

In conclusion, addressing peer violence requires a comprehensive and coordinated approach that involves schools, families and the police. Strengthening preventive programmes, promoting active responses among pupils and students, and improving interinstitutional cooperation are essential steps towards creating a safer and more supportive school environment.

Taken together, the findings reinforce the growing consensus that peer violence is a complex social phenomenon that necessitates coordinated, long-term and evidence-based interventions. Sustainable prevention depends not simply on the activities of individual teachers or institutions, but also on effective cooperation among schools, families, the police, social services, and the wider community. Reinforcing such cooperation is one of the most important preconditions for creating safer and more inclusive school environments.

While the overall findings of this study are broadly consistent with previous Slovenian research (Pečjak, 2014) and international research (Olweus, 1993; WHO, 2020; UNESCO, 2019), the presented study extends existing knowledge by providing empirical evidence from a specific regional context and simultaneously examining students' views on peer violence, perceived school safety, and the complementary roles of schools and the police.

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