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SCHOOL CLIMATE, SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING AND STUDENT SUCCESS: A Look at Safety, Bullying, Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports

SCHOOL SAFETY & CLIMATE AND WHY THEY MATTER

Healthy schools and educational environments are essential for healthy child and adolescent development.¹ A positive school climate is one that “includes norms, values and expectations that support people feeling socially, emotionally and physically safe.”² A positive school climate is associated with academic achievement, school success, effective violence prevention, healthy student development and teacher retention.³ Evidenced-based behavior interventions and disciplinary practices contribute to a positive school climate. Conversely, research has found that schools with harsh disciplinary practices typically have lower achievement scores and other poor outcomes.⁴ Providing students with a safe school environment is a key component of fostering a positive school climate.

Incidents of student crime and victimization, such as fighting, drug use, theft and being threatened with a weapon, impact the quality of the school environment. According to national school violence data, about 1.25 million children ages 12-18 experienced nonfatal

victimizations at school, including 648,600 thefts and 597,500 violent victimizations in 2011.⁵ About 33 percent of students in grades 9–12 reported they had been in a physical fight anywhere at least once during the previous 12 months, and 12 percent said they had been in a fight on

school property.⁵ Moreover, 6 percent of students reported that they had avoided at least one school activity or one or more places in school during the previous school year because of fear of attack or harm.⁵ While these figures are concerning, trend data show a 74 percent decline in violent victimization at school and an 82 percent decline in theft victimization at school between 1992 to 2010. Trend data suggest that overall youth violence in schools has been decreasing steadily (Figure 1).⁵

School response to unsafe student behavior is related to overall school climate. School disciplinary practices include the use of out-of-school suspensions and expulsions for disobedient, disruptive

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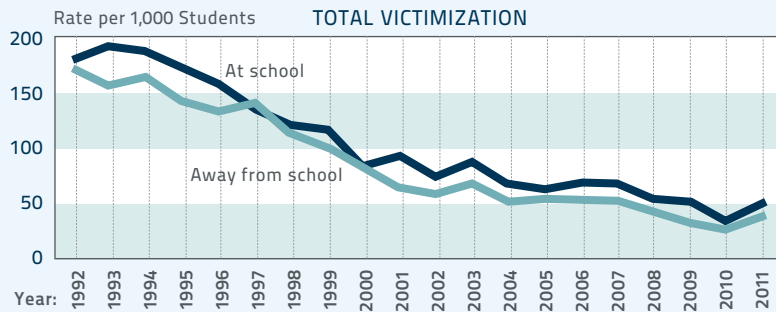


The **SCHUBERT CENTER FOR CHILD STUDIES** in the College of Arts and Sciences at Case Western Reserve University bridges research, practice, policy and education for the well-being of children and adolescents. Our focus is on children from infancy through adolescence in local, national, international and global settings.



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FIG 1. RATE OF NONFATAL VICTIMIZATIONS AGAINST STUDENTS AGE 12-18, BY LOCATION: 1992-2011⁵



school climate continued >

and/or violent behaviors that put students and/or staff at risk of harm. However, these disciplinary practices may be removing students from school who are not committing truly serious or unsafe acts and disproportionately impact children of color, children with disabilities and poor children.⁶ The National Education Policy Center found that 95 percent of suspensions were for “disruptive behavior” or “other,” while only 5 percent of suspensions were for weapons or drugs.⁶ Mirroring this trend, the Ohio Department of Education (ODE) reported that during the 2010-2011 school year, only 6 percent of out-of-school suspensions involved weapons or drugs,

while 64 percent of suspensions were for disobedient or disruptive behavior, truancy or intimidation.⁶ Studies show that these solely punitive disciplinary policies fail to improve school safety or increase students’ academic performance.⁶

BULLYING IN THE CONTEXT OF STUDENT SAFETY & SUCCESS

In her recent book, *Sticks and Stones: Defeating the Culture of Bullying and Rediscovering the Power of Character and Empathy*, author Emily Bazelon describes bullying behavior as a uniquely compelling aspect of student safety and well-being in part because it can be far-reaching and challenging to address effectively.⁷ Bullying can occur on or off school grounds, including online, and contributes to the overall school climate (Figure 2).

Bullying expert and psychologist Dan Olweus’ classic definition of bullying is when a student “is exposed repeatedly and over time to negative actions on the part of one or more students.”⁸ A negative action is when someone has the intent to cause harm to another person. **Specifically, bullying is characterized by an imbalance of power where the person who bullies uses their power to control or harm another. Bullying can be verbal (both spoken and written), social or physical.** Examples of bullying include teasing, spreading rumors, intentionally excluding someone or harassing physical behavior such as tripping.

Ohio law defines “harassment, intimidation or bullying” (HIB) as any of the following:
 (a) Any intentional written, verbal, electronic or physical act that a student has exhibited toward another particular student more than once and the behavior both
 (i) causes mental or physical harm to the other student and
 (ii) is sufficiently severe, persistent or pervasive that it creates an intimidating, threatening or abusive educational environment for the other student; (b) Violence within a dating relationship (Ohio Revised Code 3313.666).

Many experts make a distinction between bullying that occurs in-person at school and cyberbullying (bullying that involves any electronic device including cellphones, computers and communication tools such as social networking sites, text messages and chat programs). This distinction is noted because there is almost no escape from cyberbullying for the bullied child — it can occur any day or time of day, the persons engaging in the bullying behavior may not identify themselves, and inappropriate and harassing messages can reach a wide audience very quickly. Cyber-bullying also has lasting, damaging power because the electronic image or message can go “viral” and remain online for months or even years beyond the original incident and can be difficult to trace and permanently remove.

Nationally, about 28 percent of 12 to 18 year olds report being bullied at school and another 9 percent report being cyber-bullied.⁵ A higher percentage of female students report being the victim of name calling, other forms of emotional bullying and cyberbullying, whereas male students were more likely to be the victim of physical bullying. Reliable national trend data has only been available since 2005 but thus far, student reports of bullying have varied over the years and no linear trend has emerged to suggest either an increase or decrease.

Data from the Cuyahoga County Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) can be used to make local comparisons. In 2011, 18 percent of 9th to 12th graders and 33.8 percent of 7th to 8th graders reported being bullied at school.^{9,10} Female middle school and high school students were more likely than male students to report being bullied on school property and cyber-bullied, reflecting the national findings.^{9,10} YRBS data also show that the percentage of students being bullied on school property decreases significantly from 7th grade to 8th grade and again from 10th to 12th grade.^{9,10}

Trend data show a 74 percent decline in violent victimization at school and an 82 percent decline in theft victimization at school between 1992 to 2010.

There is no single factor that puts a child at risk of being bullied or bullying someone else. However, data from the National Survey of Children's Exposure to Violence show that bullying behaviors peak during middle childhood, with the highest rates of teasing and emotional bullying occurring among 6 to 9 year olds, and "Internet harassment" peaking between ages 14 and 17.¹¹ Children who are bullied tend to be perceived as different or weak, are depressed or anxious, have greater difficulty making friends and demonstrate poorer social and emotional adjustment.¹² Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) youth and youth with disabilities are two specific groups at greater risk of being bullied, especially when schools do not foster a supportive environment for them. Children who bully generally fall into two different categories: some are well-connected and have social power, while others may be isolated from their peers and experience depression.¹² Other risk factors that can lead a child to bully include having friends who bully, reduced parental involvement or a view of violence as normal or positive.¹² A limited body of research also suggests that children who experience the trauma of caregiver maltreatment or domestic violence may be at a higher risk for engaging in bullying behaviors.¹³

Appreciating the complexity of bullying is key when trying to prevent or address it. Children's roles are varied in a bullying dynamic, whether acting as the bully, being bullied, witnessing bullying or having multiple roles.¹² Some children who are bullied will also bully others.

Anti-bullying advocates warn against labeling children as bullies or victims, as it fails to acknowledge the multiple roles that children can play and mistakenly suggests that the behavior of a child cannot be changed.¹⁴

Bullying negatively impacts every child touched by it. Children who are bullied are more likely to experience depression and anxiety and have reduced academic performance.¹² Children who bully others are more likely to abuse alcohol and drugs, get into fights, drop out of school and have criminal convictions as adults.¹² Children who are bystanders are more likely to skip school and have increased mental health problems.¹⁵ Bullying can contribute to a poor school climate which has negative consequences for all children. An emphasis on positive school climate is important for promoting academic achievement and healthy student development. ■

THE MANY FORMS OF BULLYING*

- 19% MADE FUN OF, called names, or insulted
- 16% Subject of RUMORS
- 9% PUSHED, shoved, tripped, spit on
- 5% EXCLUDED from activities
- 6% THREATENED with harm
- 4% FORCED to do things they didn't want to do
- 6% Had been CYBERBULLIED
- 3% Had property DESTROYED

AGE AS A FACTOR

BULLIED

| | |
|----------|-----|
| GRADE 6 | 39% |
| GRADE 7 | 33% |
| GRADE 8 | 32% |
| GRADE 9 | 28% |
| GRADE 10 | 27% |
| GRADE 11 | 21% |
| GRADE 12 | 20% |

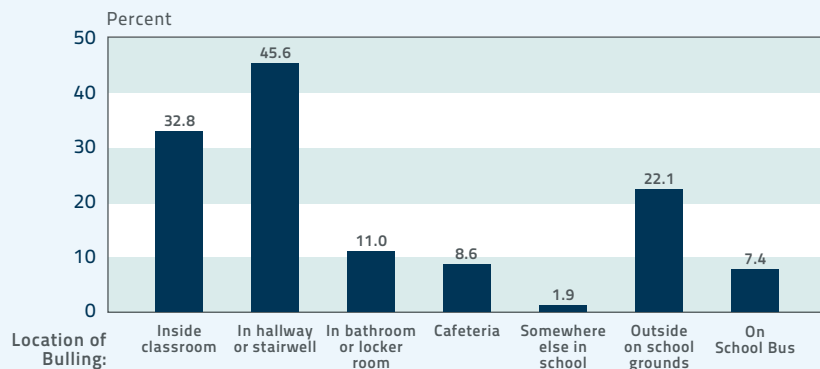
WHY DO KIDS KEEP SILENT?

- negative messages about "tattling" and "snitching"
- gender stereotypes
- concern about retaliation
- lack of confidence in adult's actions

*Of the 28% of students ages 12-18 who reported being bullied during the 2008-2009 school year.

Source: <http://www.stopbullying.gov/image-gallery/>

FIG 2. AMONG STUDENTS AGES 12-18 WHO REPORTED BEING BULLIED AT SCHOOL DURING THE SCHOOL YEAR, PERCENTAGE WHO REPORTED BEING BULLIED IN VARIOUS LOCATIONS: 2011⁵



BEST PRACTICES FOR FOSTERING A SAFE AND POSITIVE SCHOOL CLIMATE¹⁷

- 1 Implement multi-tiered systems of support for students, parents, teachers and administrators.
- 2 Improve school-based mental health support.
- 3 Promote social and emotional learning, including self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision making.
- 4 Employing effective, positive-behavior-reinforcing school discipline measures over punitive practices.



OHIO SCHOOL SAFETY AND CLIMATE POLICIES

Presently there is no federal law that directly addresses bullying in schools. However, federal civil rights laws do require schools to address instances where bullying behaviors qualify as discriminatory harassment, where the bullying is severe and persistent, creates a hostile environment at school, and is based on a student's race, color, national origin, sex/gender, disability or religion. At the state level, lawmakers have created widely-varying laws and policies to address school safety and security, student well-being and bullying. In Ohio, this includes school policies on school climate, safety planning, anti-bullying, zero tolerance, seclusion and restraint practices, and positive behavior interventions and supports.

OHIO SCHOOL CLIMATE GUIDELINES

Acknowledging the importance of positive school climate to youth development, Ohio has a number of guidelines and policies to address school climate as well as harassment and bullying in schools. As a result of the federal *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001*, the Ohio Department of Education (ODE) created the Ohio School Climate Guidelines as a framework for helping Ohio schools to create positive learning environments for their students. **The guidelines are based on four themes: accountability for results, doing what works based on scientific research, expanded parental options and involvement, and expanded local control and flexibility.** Schools voluntarily incorporate the guidelines with policies developed by the local school boards. Examples of guidelines related to school safety and academic achievement include: addressing real and perceived threats to safety and security to enable students to focus on learning, and addressing a student's sense of "belonging" in the classroom to encourage classroom participation, positive peer and teacher interactions and good study habits. The complete list of guidelines can be found at: education.ohio.gov/Topics/Other-Resources/School-Safety/Safe-and-Supportive-Learning/Ohio-School-Climate-Guidelines.

SCHOOL SAFETY POLICY

The *No Child Left Behind Act* also requires states to have a policy regarding school safety, which was adopted by the Ohio Board of Education in 2003. The policy states that a student who attends a "persistently dangerous public elementary or high school" or is the victim of a violent crime on Ohio public school grounds is allowed to attend a different school in the district that is not persistently dangerous.¹⁶ A school is designated as persistently dangerous if it has two or more violent criminal offenses per 100 students that occur on school grounds in each of two consecutive years. A school can also be designated as persistently dangerous regardless of enrollment if it has five or more violent criminal offenses in each of two consecutive years.

In addition, Ohio school safety policy requires that the board of education in each city file a comprehensive school safety plan and floor plan for each school building (ORC 3313.536). The Ohio Attorney General recently issued a set of guidelines for implementing this policy. The Ohio Revised Code specifies that the development of the safety plan must involve a variety of people and should include protocols to deal with a number of school-based emergency events such as natural disaster, fire, an active shooter, medical emergencies or acts of terrorism. Notably, the policy does not include a requirement for a positive school climate strategy as part of the overall safety plan.

A positive school climate is one that “includes norms, values and expectations that support people feeling socially, emotionally and physically safe.”²



ANTI-HARASSMENT, INTIMIDATION AND BULLYING (ANTI-HIB) POLICY

The ODE offers a variety of anti-bullying resources including an anti-harassment, intimidation and bullying (HIB) model policy. In 2007, Ohio codified law (ORC 3313.666) required that the board of education in each district establish a policy prohibiting HIB. In 2012, Ohio passed House Bill 116 (also known as the “Jessica Logan Act” in memory of a student who committed suicide allegedly due to bullying) to expand the scope of its anti-HIB policy to prohibit harassment by electronic means.

School-specific anti-HIB policies should be developed with the help of parents, school employees, school volunteers, students and community members. Key components of each policy include: a definition of HIB, a procedure for reporting incidents and a requirement that school personnel report known incidents, a procedure for protecting children who are bullied, and a disciplinary procedure for any student engaging in HIB. The ODE provides access to a model policy and related training materials to help local districts implement their own policies. Additionally, the ODE and other state agencies have formed the “Ohio Anti-HIB Initiative” to sponsor professional development about Ohio’s model policy and best practices for creating a safe and supportive learning environment. More information and anti-HIB resources can be found at education.ohio.gov.

ZERO TOLERANCE LAW

Ohio enacted a mandatory zero tolerance law for addressing school discipline in 1998. The law requires local school districts to adopt “a policy of zero tolerance for violent, disruptive or inappropriate behavior, including excessive truancy, and establish strategies to address such behavior that range from prevention to intervention” (ORC 3313.534). As a result of zero tolerance policies being implemented nationwide, out-of-school suspensions and expulsions increased dramatically. While zero tolerance policies were passed with the intention of promoting school safety, they have had the unintended consequence of unnecessarily harsh responses to minor infractions and increasing the risk of permanently disconnecting young people from schools.^{6,17}

SCHOOL-WIDE POSITIVE BEHAVIOR INTERVENTIONS AND SUPPORT (PBIS)

School-wide PBIS is a proactive set of evidence-based, data-informed strategies to promote healthy student engagement and deter inappropriate behavior such as bullying. PBIS is based on a three-tiered model of prevention and intervention aimed at creating safe and effective schools.¹⁸ The first tier targets all students and staff in creating a positive school climate. Integration of social and emotional learning (SEL) skills into daily work with

students and school routines should be encouraged as part of a prevention strategy that promotes a positive school climate. The second tier involves more targeted programming and interventions to identify and support children at risk of behavioral health problems and/or more serious disciplinary problems. These programs could include mentoring, check-in/checkout programs (students check-in with an adult or teachers at specified times throughout the day) or youth advocacy programs. The third tier is for those youth identified in need of intensive intervention and may include both school-based mental health services and community-based supports.

ODE recently adopted a policy on PBIS and Restraint and Seclusion to be implemented beginning the 2013-2014 school year (OAC 3301-35-15). A key provision of the policy is that it requires limited use of student seclusion and restraint. **The policy also requires the implementation of school-wide PBIS and evidence-based behavioral interventions in order to enhance academic and social behavioral outcomes for all students.** The ODE promotes the use of PBIS in acknowledgement of research demonstrating that when integrated with effective academic instruction, PBIS provides the support students need to become actively engaged in their own learning and academic success. ■

BEST PRACTICES: Promoting School Safety through PBIS and Improved Social and Emotional Learning in Ohio

Even with model policies in place and evidence-based programs identified, the degree to which policies and best practices are implemented varies not only by school district, of which there are more than 600 in Ohio, but by school and even classroom. School security, safety and discipline policies should be aligned with the overall mission to promote positive school climate and student success. Providing school administrators, teachers, students and parents with the training, tools and support to implement and sustain best practices is critical. School initiatives come and go in the education landscape; therefore lasting success in building and maintaining a healthy school climate is contingent upon schools receiving research-supported curricula and resources with ongoing professional development and support. Interventions and outcomes can be strengthened by fostering connections between parent associations, youth groups, afterschool programs and other community partners dedicated to healthy youth development. The following highlights just a few examples of effective and promising positive behavior and learning programs in Ohio that involve partnerships between communities and schools.

Several organizations in Ohio focus on educating students about tolerance and respect. These programs aim to improve the school environment in order to promote students' engagement in their learning, reduce bullying behaviors and build character. One such approach is *Facing History and Ourselves*, a national program with a Cleveland chapter (<http://www.facinghistory.org/offices/cleveland>). The program provides educational resources and seminars to help combat racism, anti-semitism and other forms of prejudice. Using recent historical examples of hatred and violence, such as the Holocaust and racially discriminatory laws and practices in the U.S., the program shows students the consequences of hatred and how their own daily actions and choices can impact those around them and be an important link to a safer future. Recent evaluations of the program show that *Facing History and Ourselves* promotes respect for the rights of others with different views, fosters awareness of the power and danger of prejudice and discrimination, and increases students' sense of civic efficacy.¹⁹

Another local group that provides numerous programs for discussing diversity and addressing issues of prejudice and bullying is the Anti-Defamation League (ADL). The ADL has offices in Cleveland that serve communities in Ohio, Kentucky, West Virginia and Western Pennsylvania (<http://regions.adl.org/cleveland/programs/>). Programs are offered for a variety of environments and audiences including educators, law firms, students and law enforcement. The ADL offers a program specifically aimed at bullying called *No Place for Hate*. This program provides a model for combatting intolerance, bullying and hatred. The program helps schools create a committee of parents, faculty, administrators and community members to develop better infrastructures for handling conflict and to develop and adopt a resolution of respect that affirms the school's commitment to respect for diversity. Additionally, the program requires that schools complete at least three anti-bias projects that introduce students to other cultures and beliefs, celebrate diversity and promote respect. Other programs offered by the ADL include the *Responding to Cyberbullying* program and an educational initiative called

Becoming an Ally: Responding to Name Calling and Bullying which helps students go from bystander to one who takes active steps towards promoting a positive school environment.

FIG 3. SOCIAL & EMOTIONAL LEARNING FIVE CORE COMPETENCIES



Source: casel.org

Ohio Partners in Character Education (OPCE) is a nonprofit organization affiliated with the Better Business Bureau Foundation Center for Character Education (<http://www.charactereducationohio.org>). Character education involves efforts to communicate and integrate into the lives of youth core character qualities such as caring, citizenship, fairness, respect, responsibility and trustworthiness. OPCE works with the ODE to provide character education resources to Ohio schools through professional development workshops, advocacy, a statewide character network and the Ohio Schools of Character Awards.

The *Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning* (CASEL) is a national nonprofit organization that helps to establish social and emotional learning as a key part of children's education ([casel](http://casel.org)).

Social and emotional learning refers to “the capacity to recognize and manage emotions, solve problems effectively and establish positive relationships with others.”

org). Social and emotional learning refers to “the capacity to recognize and manage emotions, solve problems effectively and establish positive relationships with others.”²⁰ The Cleveland Metropolitan School District (CMSD) has been working with CASEL to implement its *Humanware Initiative (Humanware)* (cmsdnet.net/Departments/Humanware.aspx). *Humanware* was started to address learning conditions in the CMSD schools so that all students could be socially and academically equipped to succeed. *Humanware* uses data, research-based curricula, anti-bullying initiatives, community service partnerships, PBIS and early intervention strategies to promote the five core competencies of social and emotional learning (**Figure 3**). For example, the PATHS (Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies) curriculum implemented by CMSD is an evidence-based curriculum for children in Pre-K through fifth grade that focuses on skill building to improve

social and emotional learning. The PATHS curriculum includes friendship skills, emotional skills, self-control skills and problem-solving skills-building.

School-wide PBIS, as noted previously, is a decisionmaking framework that helps guide the selection and implementation of evidenced-based practices for improving students' academic and behavioral outcomes. A continuum of positive behavior support for all students within a school is implemented in classroom and non-classroom settings. School districts vary widely in the degree to which PBIS is implemented and there are different approaches to successfully implementing PBIS in Ohio schools. For example, Edison Elementary School in the Willoughby East Lake School district offers one approach to school-wide PBIS. The goal of the program is to focus on five character traits: safe, organized, attitude, respect and responsibility (SOAR). Students are

shown videos made by their peers and the staff that model expected behaviors. Students can then earn “eagle bucks” for demonstrating positive behaviors, which can be redeemed for rewards. A list of problem behaviors and their consequences is also made available to parents and students. Cincinnati Public Schools (CPS) implemented a school-wide PBIS framework in 2007.²¹ A key feature of their program is a three-tiered pyramid of intervention that provides progressive levels of support to students. Additionally, CPS has adopted a Positive School Culture Plan, which emphasizes an alternative disciplinary approach to zero tolerance that has resulted in some positive discipline outcomes. Two programs, Alternative to Suspension and Alternative to Expulsion, provide academic instruction along with counseling and social skills lessons at off campus locations to students who exhibit chronic disruptive behavior. ■

IMPLICATIONS AND DIRECTIONS for the Future

Important steps toward improving school climate for all children include: successful implementation of recent ODE policy changes and consideration of further legislative reforms; additional research on effective school- and community-based interventions; and targeted funding for school-based programming and training as well as research, development and evaluation.

Motivated in part by the recent school shootings in Newton, Connecticut and in Chardon, Ohio, the Ohio Senate began a series of public hearings on school safety in the spring of 2013. Joint senate committee hearings included testimony from experts in school administration, education, mental health, child and

adolescent development and public safety, as well as from parents. The hearings included discussions of mental health standards, school discipline policies and successful programs on bullying prevention and school response among other topics. **Expert testimony, credible research, (including student safety,**

risk-taking and discipline data, program evaluation findings and developmentally appropriate interventions) and stakeholder input should inform any proposed legislation to ensure that education policy concerning safety and security effectively advances student well-being.

Further study is needed to address a variety of issues related to school climate and violence. More definitive findings on the causes and effects of bullying, for instance, could be used to inform better anti-bullying programs. This should

implications continued >

include an exploration of the potential role trauma and stress play in childhood development and engagement in negative behaviors in order to better address some of the factors that may contribute to bullying behaviors. **Recognizing childhood trauma and other potential mental health needs and helping children and youth manage stress are two ways to address broader school safety and school climate concerns.** More comprehensive student behavior data collection, analysis and reporting would better inform the public and decisionmakers about student and school needs. Additionally, more evaluation research on interventions, including PBIS, SEL, school-based mental health supports, mentoring and advocacy efforts, and trauma-informed care-related programming could help to improve current programs and develop better future interventions.

Finally, particularly given the challenging public school funding environment and the numerous performance and accountability requirements faced by schools, targeted funding for school-wide PBIS and SEL programming is vital. Staff and teacher training, educational resources and ongoing professional support are needed to successfully implement and sustain a universal approach to positive school climate. Supportive school services, such as student counseling and behavioral health care, also remains a continuing unmet need. Effective community partnerships should be developed where possible to help address these needs. ■

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