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School Safety

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Pepperdine University's National School Safety Center is a partnership of the U.S. Department of Justice and U.S. Department of Education. NSSC's goal is to promote safe schools free of drug traffic and abuse, gangs, weapons, vandalism and bullying; to encourage good discipline, attendance and community support; and to help ensure a quality education for all children.

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BY MARY TOBIAS WEAVER

A statewide standardized school crime reporting system can provide valuable data for making critical decisions about resource allocation.

Gazing into a crystal ball

Violence on school campuses is a critical problem. Newspaper headlines proclaiming our schools to be unsafe disturb policymakers, law enforcement officials, educators, parents and the general public. The side effect of such publicity, whether founded or unsupported, is a perception that there is a frightening and increasing level of violence among our youth, especially on school campuses. As a result, the public is more concerned about school violence today than ever before.

National statistics from government reports and private sources provide some indication that youth violence is on the increase. The Atlanta-based Centers for Disease Control and Prevention report that in the fall of 1991, one in 20 students carried a gun at least once a month. The 1991 National Education Goals Report stated that one out of every four high school seniors reported they had been threatened with violence; 14 percent said that they were injured in school.

A 1993 *USA Weekend* survey of 65,000 students across the nation revealed that 55 percent of the students in grades 10-12 know that weapons are regularly brought to school; 79 percent said violence often occurs from "stupid things like bumping into someone."

Thus, many school campuses, once considered "islands of safety," are now faced with daily violence. Whether initiated in the community or on the school campus, violence presents a challenge of crisis proportions to public education.

Local school crime data unavailable

Despite the generalized national data, states and local communities rarely have the benefit of localized information about school crime on which to base intelligent decisions about resource allocations. Yet each year state legislatures hear pleas from constituents and special interest groups for more funding for public and school safety programs. Each year the elected officials in these state legislative bodies respond to public concerns by proposing legislation for programs that often do not match the real safety needs of school campuses.

In June 1993, U.S. Secretary of Education Richard Riley announced that the Clinton administration had forwarded the Safe Schools Act of 1993 to Congress. This act, embodied in S. 1123 and H.R. 2455, would provide $75 million nationwide in 1994 for grants to schools that face high rates of crime, violence and disciplinary problems. As currently written, the legislation requires schools and districts wishing to qualify for funding to assess and report the incidence of school crime and violence. The Clinton administration has emphasized that school safety begins with an assessment of school crime so that appropriate school-specific strategies can be developed and implemented.

School crime data are important for all levels of policymakers, from school site councils and safe school committees to state legislatures. A statewide standardized reporting system that provides accurate and consistently collected data on school crime from all school districts is a requisite. Comprehensive information about the type and frequency of school crime must be made available to policymakers as they make critical decisions about resource allocations.

Caveats

Before the statewide data can provide an accurate longitudinal assessment of school safety programs and strategies, some caveats must be discussed. An effective statewide school crime data system requires standardization, training for all personnel involved, and monitoring and assistance in reporting procedures if the published results are to be either meaningful or useful.

When members of state legislatures examine aggregate data from schools and school districts to direct appropriate amounts of available state resources to school safety, they must be assured that the data provide a valid picture of school

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safety conditions. However, without clear standards, schools may use different definitions of what constitutes a crime and may unintentionally underreport or overreport the incidence of school crime on their campuses.

While many crimes, such as arson, are easily defined, school personnel may have difficulty correctly identifying other crimes. For example, battery is defined in the *California Penal Code* as the "willful and unlawful use of force or violence upon the person of another." A strict interpretation of this definition would classify schoolyard fisticuffs as battery. Yet it is highly probable that school personnel vary in their opinions about how serious a fight must be before it is recorded as a battery in a school crime reporting system.

There also is a high probability that school personnel will confuse the legal definitions of assault and battery. An assault is an unlawful attempt, coupled with the present ability, to commit a violent injury on the person of another.

In the first year of California's reporting system, one elementary school district with an enrollment of 20,000 students reported 2,336 assaults, while the largest unified school district in the state with an enrollment of 600,000 students reported a total of 1,345 assaults. This discrepancy occurred because of inconsistent reporting.

Divergent reporting methods

Schools and school districts vary in their systematic methods of collecting and recording data. Some districts have sophisticated reporting and data recording procedures, even computerized systems. Others rely on a less structured and possibly less thorough manner. Schools and districts that do not have an organized and consistently applied data collection scheme are more likely to miss incidents and thereby underreport school crime incidents.

The result of divergent reporting procedures was evident in California when one urban district with an enrollment of 37,000 students reported a total of 76 assaults while another urban district with an enrollment of nearly 46,000 students reported 2,754 assaults. Adequate training solved the reporting problem.

Negative publicity

When school crime statistics become available, the media often produce public interest articles and film clips about the safety of campuses. Rather than supporting the school's sincere efforts to reduce violence, the articles frequently damage a school district's reputation by labeling it as a source of "high crime."

One means of diffusing adverse publicity relies on the district's readiness with articles and information for the media. Such resources acknowledge safe schools needs, describe strategies initiated to reduce the presence of crime and violence on school campuses, and compare school crime and violence rates with those of the local community supplied by local law enforcement agencies.

Without a proactive school crime publicity campaign, schools and districts remain vulnerable to the media message and risk being labeled as a high-crime campus or district. Adverse publicity also can provide incentives to schools and districts to underreport the incidence of crime on their campuses to avoid such labels.

Schools and districts that initiate school safety intervention strategies and/or strict suspension and expulsion policies usually experience an increase in reportable school crime incidents. This is due to the increased attention the targeted offenses receive. This type of increase can also have adverse media impact.

In one high school district in the central valley of California, administrators initiated a cooperative undercover operation with the sheriff's department to verify and halt suspected drug sales on campus. The effort was successful, but the district showed a significant increase in substance abuse incidents during that reporting period. The media gave the district the distinction of leading the valley districts in school crime. With negative media attention such as this, districts may be reluctant to take a strict stance on safety enforcement.

Considerations for data collection

Statewide systems of data collection give important information to legislatures when they are determining how to assist schools, programs and communities in developing strategies for reducing the incidence of school crime. States need to consider many factors in building a system that yields accurate as well as complete data. The following elements offer reference points in establishing or refining such a statewide system.

Carefully consider the categories of school crime to be reported. When designing a reporting system, a task force that can provide input about the types of data needed is useful. The group should include representatives from schools, law enforcement, the state legislature and local education agencies that already collect crime data to ensure sufficient information about desirable reporting requirements and feasible reporting procedures.

When selecting categories for the reporting system, the task force should carefully balance the "need-to-know" items with "would-be-nice-to-know" items. In its initial data collection efforts in 1980, California asked school officials to report each incident, including descriptive information about victims and offenders, time, and the specific location on the school campus where each crime occurred *as well as* techniques used to effectively combat crime and violence on school campuses. The information regarding prevention was to describe security and surveillance strategies, personnel, types of staff training, specialized student counseling programs, and nine special curricula and services. All of this data was an information overload.

Although the information received was interesting, it was not fully used in developing strategies. In addition, these reporting standards were unwieldy for the schools, given all of the other types of reporting required of schools. In later attempts at refining the reporting form,

many crime classifications were added, but other categories were eliminated to facilitate school site responses. For collecting the "nice-to-know" information, using a sampling of districts may be a better strategy.

Whatever crime categories are selected for the reporting procedure, information about crimes committed on school campuses or at school-related events will become base-line data. Therefore, states are advised to select specific categories rather than consolidating groups of crimes. For example, aggregate data about substance abuse cannot be used in longitudinal studies if the category is later refined to include specific reporting categories of marijuana, alcohol and other drugs. Too many variables exist that prevent a direct comparison longitudinally.

Carefully define the crime categories included in the school crime reporting system. Providing definitions for each crime category will help schools and districts report incidents accurately. Such definitions are as important as selecting appropriate categories for a reporting program. Specific, easy-to-understand language help staff make consistent judgments about reportable incidents and increase the reliability of the reported data. Schools and districts will also require less technical assistance from the state agency to meet clearly defined reporting requirements.

Depending on the state's legal requirements, the state agency may wish to issue state administrative regulations that provide definitions for crime categories and specific reporting parameters. Such regulations carry the importance of statutes and usually undergo careful legal scrutiny and public examination. The resulting regulations provide clear direction to persons assigned to collect and report incidents of school crime and violence.

Create a standardized approach to school crime reporting. A set of standardized reporting forms and procedures allows schools to analyze crime problems on their campuses and enables district personnel to provide additional resources to specific schools for use in eliminating school crime. Standardized reporting also makes training more effective.

Standardized forms and reporting procedures result in accurate data that can be collected on a regional and statewide basis. With regional and statewide information, state policymakers, regional and local governmental agencies, and school districts can support existing strategies or develop new prevention and intervention safety strategies.

In times when school personnel are asked to take on more assignments with fewer resources, state agencies should consider keeping the form as simple and short as possible. Computerized reporting can relieve some of the burden of reporting data. States can also create ways for districts to put the reporting format on a computer file, fill out the necessary data and transmit the information to the state agency responsible for assembling the data. Other reporting possibilities include electronic reporting and interactive voice responses by telephone. Today, schools and districts are beyond file cards in a shoe box.

Consider how often schools and districts should report data to the state education agency. The goal for state agencies collecting school crime data should be to obtain accurate data from all school districts in a timely manner and consistent format for the efficient analyses necessary for policy decisions. Ideally the state agency should have sufficient staff and resources to collect data on a semi-annual basis. This will provide the opportunity to detect underreporting or overreporting problems early. The state agency also can gear training programs to assist districts in reporting procedures before year-end. This will lessen the possibility of a district failing to report.

Districts should collect data from their schools on a monthly basis. District personnel can determine early in the reporting period which schools and programs are not accurately collecting or reporting data. The designated person for district crime reporting must also have time to gather the required data before the state reporting deadline. If a school appears to be inaccurately reporting incidents of school crime, district personnel can review their practices and offer assistance to increase accuracy in crime reports.

A monthly reporting system for schools increases the likelihood of receiving accurate data. If school personnel do not record an incident shortly after it occurs, the incident can be forgotten altogether and the probability of an inaccurate report increases.

Define the purpose of data on school crimes. Some data systems have been established to determine the extent to which criminal activity interrupts the teaching and learning process at schools. Other systems are designed only to report the extent of actual crimes committed on school campuses.

Provide training. A critical element in developing a statewide school crime reporting system is thorough training with regard to definitions and reporting procedures. Personnel assigned to collecting these data must share common definitions and be committed to consistent reporting procedures if the data are to be valid. Because most educators have not had the type of training provided to the law enforcement community, they often use crime classifications inaccurately. Therefore, training is essential.

A state agency establishing a reporting system should consider developing a variety of training vignettes to illustrate how to report incidents of crime committed on the school campus and at school-related events. These vignettes will add a feedback element to the training presented. In addition, states should consider developing printed materials to facilitate the reporting process at the local level. Include in these materials common questions and answers related to reporting procedures, specific definitions of crimes from the state's penal code and specific hints for easy reporting at the school site.

While training can be accomplished in a variety of formats, the most effective are teleconferencing and training videos. Definitions and illustrations can be developed and formatted for CD-ROM.

This type of training affords school personnel the opportunity to repeat training content as often as needed.

Establish policies for reporting school crime. Anticipate questions from schools and districts. Determine the appropriate responses and incorporate the information in training programs. Typical questions the California Department of Education received focused on the following issues:

- Should *attempted* crimes be reported or only those that were completed? (California asked schools and districts to include attempts because the state legislature specifically wanted information related to the impact of criminal activity on the education process.)
- What if several crimes are committed at the same time by a person or group of persons? The Uniform Crime Reporting procedures established by the Federal Bureau of Investigation classifies the crime according to the most serious offense for reporting purposes. For example, if a staff member is confronted by a former student and beaten and raped, the rape, not the battery, should be reported. Exceptions to the hierarchal procedure for reporting include arson and possession of a weapon. In the cases of arson or possession of weapons in conjunction with another crime, schools are advised to report both the arson or weapon possession along with the other crime.
- Should schoolyard fights be reported if both students consent to the fight?
- Should incidents be reported if they occur on a student's way to or from school?
- Should incidents that occur on a school bus be reported?
- How should dollar losses to the district be determined?
- What if an insurance claim results in full reimbursement to the district?
- How long must school crime reports be kept?
- What training about school crime reporting can be provided to the media to reduce the possibilities of false interpretations and unfair use of data?
- How can schools and districts use the data constructively when dealing with the media?

To ensure accurate reporting, establish a system to monitor the reporting process in districts. Although the monitoring of any reporting system is staff intensive and potentially costly, it is an important element in maintaining consistent data collection. Data that are suspect relative to underreporting and overreporting do not serve a purpose for allocating resources. Staff monitors, however, need to be careful not to create an adversarial role unless there is evidence of deliberate falsification of data.

Fund the crime reporting program at a level to assure adequate staff and resources. Accurate data about the incidence of school crime is critical. States must be willing to support the full reporting operations if they want valid information. Funding must be set aside for personnel, statewide training and printed and electronic materials. If state agencies receive minimal funding, the state will have no guarantee of valid data.

Using the data

When reviewing the data, it is important not to use them to make cross-district comparisons. The only reliable and valid comparisons that should be made are crime rates at the same school over time or crime rates of comparable schools. These comparisons determine funding priorities and assess the adequacy of schools' crime prevention strategies.

Data related to incidents of crime on school campuses or at school-related events are critical tools for all policymakers. School crime statistics must be accurate if they are to be used to develop an understanding of the most pressing safety issues confronting a school or district. Anything less is tantamount to gazing into a crystal ball to determine the safety needs of schools and districts. Accurate data provide useful information for planning and implementing strategies that result in safe schools, a national goal.

Administrators provide leadership

Data gathered from the Commission's study clearly shows that school administrators play a vital role in creating a positive school environment and in reducing school violence. Recommendations to administrators include:

- Strongly encourage all adults to serve as positive role models for students.
- To the extent possible, promote student involvement in decision making regarding discipline policies and practices; curricula and educational materials; resource allocation; recreational activities; and program and staff evaluations.
- Implement a means to anonymously report violent behavior or suspected trouble. Provide training on how to be a good witness.
- Solicit the support of school staff, parents and community volunteers to help supervise the campus and school-related events.
- Solicit support from local police to patrol popular routes that students use going to and from school.
- Initiate a safe school committee with representatives from the entire school community. Be careful to include a balance of gender and ethnic diversity. Tasks of the committee include developing a crisis management plan.
- Hire staff to match the diversity of the student body.
- Make sure that educational materials reflect the cultures and ethnic groups represented on campus.
- Develop alternative activities to meet students' social and recreational needs.