

# School Safety

Help  The Violence!



1991-1992

**U.S. Department of Justice  
National Institute of Justice**

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## School Safety

As part of the School Safety News Service, *School Safety* is published by the National School Safety Center to communicate current trends and effective programs in school safety to educators, law enforcers, lawyers, judges, government officials, business leaders, journalists and the public. Annual subscription: \$59.00. Components of the School Safety News Service are published monthly September to May.

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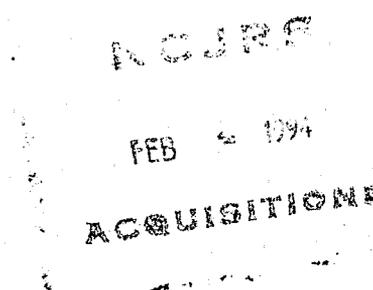
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Prepared under Grant No. 85-MU-CX-0003, funded by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice and the U.S. Department of Education. Points of view or opinions in this document are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice, U.S. Department of Education or Pepperdine University. Neither NSSC nor any of its employees makes any warranty, expressed or implied, nor assumes any legal liability or responsibility for the accuracy, completeness or usefulness of any information, apparatus, product or process described herein. Copyright © 1994 National School Safety Center.

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*A comprehensive assessment of school safety must begin with an appreciation of current national surveys. However, national studies are not sufficiently informative to guide local school safety planning actions.*

# Evaluating school violence trends

### *True or False?*

- *Violent crime in the United States has increased dramatically during the past 20 years.*
- *Students increasingly say that they feel unsafe at school.*

Whenever we ask these two questions of groups gathered to talk about school violence, a majority indicate that both of these statements are true and are surprised when information presented indicates that the statements may be false. Information from the Bureau of Justice Statistics shows that violent crime in the United States has remained fairly stable during the past 20 years.<sup>1</sup> Data recently released for the National Educational Longitudinal Study shows that between 1980 and 1990 there was a 12.2 percent decrease in the number of students who report feeling unsafe at school and 8.1 percent decrease in the proportion of 10th-graders nationwide saying that they felt unsafe at school.<sup>2</sup>

Ongoing work with the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing School Violence Advisory Panel has convinced panel members that it is best not

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to presume that school violence is fully understood. For example, in California, members of the panel asked educators and students to indicate how big of a problem violence was at their school campus. Panel members were somewhat surprised to learn that a sizable number of students and staff felt that violence at their school was a "moderate problem," while only 2 to 3 percent believed it to be a "very big problem." The individuals most likely to indicate that school violence was a "big problem" were those who personally volunteered to attend school violence focus groups held by the panel. (See Figure 1.)

### **Increased public awareness**

To better understand public sentiment about school violence, five major newspapers were surveyed for articles published from 1982 to the present that focused on school violence. These newspapers included the *Los Angeles Times*, *The New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, *The Wall Street Journal* and *The Christian Science Monitor*.

A total of 349 articles printed during this 10-year period dealt with school violence, and nearly half of those were published in 1992 and 1993. Many articles listed statistics, usually without a primary source, and anecdotes, usually of sensational incidents, all designed to substantiate the pervasiveness of the school violence problem. This became a

matter of concern to the panel because media coverage may accurately portray increased public awareness and concern about school violence, but may not accurately reflect what actually happens on school campuses.

In addition, public opinion polls and unscientific surveys seem to carry more weight than carefully conducted surveys that use randomly selected samples. This further complicates the public's understanding of what types of violence occur and how frequently they occur inside schools.

One recent example is a survey published in August 1993. In this national survey, more than 65,000 sixth- through twelfth-grade students responded by filling out and mailing in a questionnaire printed in *USA Today*. Thirty-seven percent indicated that they "don't feel safe at school." This information continues to receive high notoriety and unfortunately sways public opinion more than carefully conducted studies, even though the survey was never intended to be considered scientific.

Influenced by these observations, the CTC School Violence Advisory Panel concluded that it is impossible to construct state or local policy about school violence with information derived from unscientific opinion polls, media stories, or for that matter, even more carefully conducted national surveys.

As part of its efforts, the panel com-

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piled information about existing school safety and violence surveys and constructed survey instruments to gather information pertinent to its task: the development of recommendations for training educators to address school violence. What follows first are descriptions of some of the assessment tools available to evaluate school safety and violence conditions. Following these are recommended procedures that will enable local schools and communities to evaluate their own school safety conditions and needs.

### Violent Schools — Safe Schools<sup>3</sup>

This National Institute of Education study, the first large-scale investigation of school crime and violence, was completed by the former Department of Health, Education and Welfare as mandated by Congress (PL 93-380). The study was a massive undertaking involving lengthy questionnaires administered to 31,373 students and 23,895 teachers. Respondents reported about their experiences related to crime and violence victimization on school campuses. Questions were also asked about school climate in order to relate effective school practice to crime and violence patterns.

The following surveys were included in the NIE study and can be useful today for local schools and communities assessing their school crime and violence problems.

- *NIE incident reporting sheet.* Principals were asked to record incidents of school crime, violence and disruption for one randomly selected month during the school year. An incident report sheet was used for each occurrence of:
  - offenses against property (trespass, breaking and entering, theft without force, bombing, arson, willful destruction of property, setting a false alarm, and threats to commit property offense);
  - offenses against persons (robbery, physical attack, fighting, group conflict/fight, rape, murder, other offenses against persons and threats to commit an offense against person); and
  - other offenses (selling drugs, use or

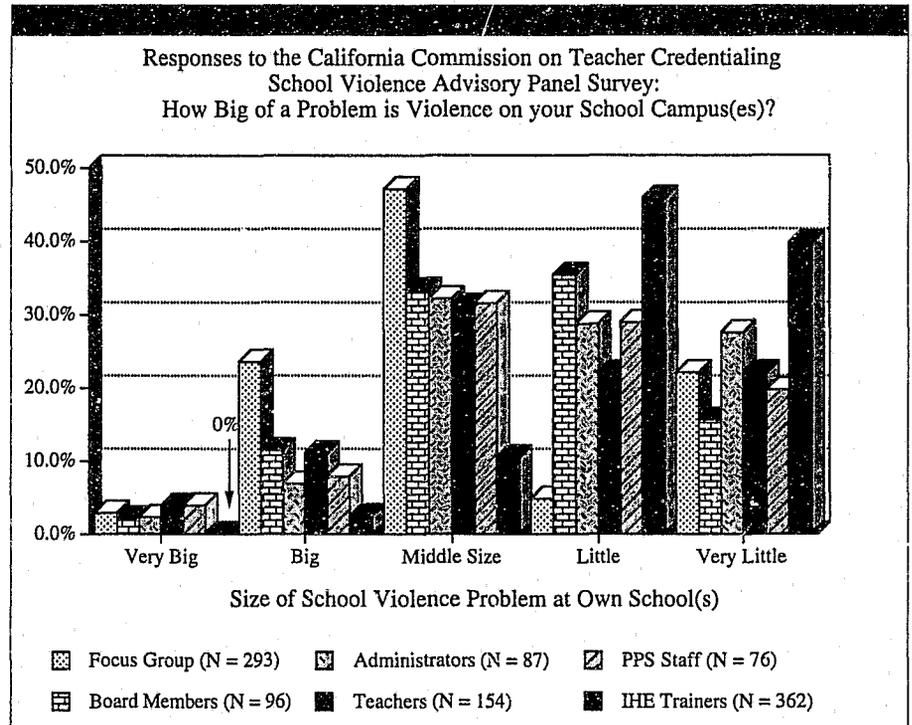


Figure 1

possession of drugs, possession of weapon, disruption of school activities, any other offense).

- *NIE principal questionnaire, Phase I.* This instrument requests information about modifications to the physical plant, discipline and security procedures taken to increase school safety. Principal's opinions about essential school safety actions are solicited. This instrument provides a quick overview of safety-related concerns in any school and can be used to begin a districtwide school safety planning process.

Drafted in the mid-1970s, some of the response alternatives in this questionnaire are somewhat dated. For example, personal computers were not available at that time to assist the development of site-specific databases to track safety information.

- *NIE principal questionnaire, Phase II.* This instrument is an extension of the Phase I survey. It requests descriptive information about the school and its neighboring community. This, as other NIE questionnaires, should be scrutinized for dated items and response options. For example, one item asks the principal to indicate how often he or she paddled

someone during a specific month. Given current knowledge about the detrimental effects of corporal punishment, such options should be edited.

- *NIE teacher questionnaire.* This is a prevalence-type questionnaire that requests information about teachers' experiences with robbery, theft, rape and physical attack during the months of September and May of the current school year. Teachers also can provide detailed information about the most recent incident that happened to them.

Questions are included about student conduct, student characteristics and teaching practices. Many of the questions focus on instructional practices and assess school effectiveness and climate issues. With some modifications, this instrument can be used with all school staff, not just teachers.

- *NIE student questionnaire.* This questionnaire asks students about their personal and family characteristics, perceptions of the school and class climate, opinions and reactions to safety-related incidents, and moral reasoning. As with the teacher survey, many of the questions included in the student survey focus broadly on school climate or culture and

school effectiveness associated with safety- and violence-related concerns.

- *NIE student interview.* This instrument requests information similar to the student survey, but obtains it through face-to-face interviews. Although there is obvious concern about the validity of a general interview process that requests students to disclose personal victimization experiences, a modification of this protocol could be used.

By conducting student focus groups that examine the incidence of violence on a school campus, the quality and depth of information about threatening and unsafe incidents can be enhanced.

#### **National Educational Longitudinal Study<sup>4</sup>**

NELS is a reliable survey of schools and students throughout the United States. The student survey instrument used in this investigation includes a few questions that pertain to feelings and experiences about safety on school campuses. It provides an extremely useful source of multi-year comparative information. The instrument can also be used to assess school climate or specific safety items could be extracted and included in another school violence safety instrument.

#### **National Adolescent Student Health Survey<sup>5</sup>**

NASH was developed by a panel of youth health experts for the Association for the Advancement of Health Education. After field testing, it was administered during the 1987-88 school year to 3,789 students attending 176 schools in 20 states. The results were presented in 1989.

Included in this instrument are questions about the following violence-related experiences:

- student perceptions of adult responses to violent incidents;
- student perceptions of the consequences of fighting;
- student strategies for avoiding fights;
- weapons possession;
- student victimization (physical threats, robbery by force, physical attacks, sexual assaults); and

- participation in violence prevention programs.

#### **Youth Risk Behavior Survey<sup>6</sup>**

The Youth Risk Behavior Survey was developed as part of the Youth Risk Surveillance System of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Its purpose is to assess the prevalence of youth risk behaviors related to six categories associated with negative health outcomes:

- intentional or unintentional injury;
- alcohol and other drug use;
- sexual behavior;
- tobacco use;
- diet; and
- physical activity.

Data collected with this 84-item questionnaire is used to evaluate progress toward the goals set forth in *Healthy People 2000*. Specific questions are included about youth fights (as a precursor of more violent outcomes), weapons possession and past participation in violence prevention programs. Students are asked to indicate how frequently they have carried a weapon in the previous 30 days, either for self-protection or because of the possibility of being in a fight. The YRBS has recently been modified to include questions about violence and weapon possession occurring specifically inside schools and within the community.

#### **National Crime Victimization Survey: School Crime Supplement<sup>5</sup>**

This survey is part of an ongoing assessment of crime victimization among a random sample of households nationwide. A detailed questionnaire inquires about the types of victimization each household member age 12 or older experienced in the preceding six months. *The School Crime Supplement* was included in the 1989 survey to ask youth ages 12-19 about any victimization that may have occurred on the campus where they attended school.

#### **California School Safety and Climate Survey<sup>8</sup>**

The CSSCS is a revision of the student

and teacher surveys included in *School Safety: A Planning Guide for Action*, which was developed by the California Department of Education and the Office of the State Attorney General. This 82-item instrument includes a comprehensive list of questions about personal characteristics, school quality indicators, physical safety, school organizational structure and school culture, as well as a checklist for the reporting of 19 different kinds of incidents that may have occurred during the previous 30 days.

This instrument has been used in dozens of schools throughout California, Hawaii and Kentucky. Its purpose is to provide a broad range of school safety and climate information in support of comprehensive school safety planning.

#### **Trends and Issues 91<sup>9</sup>**

The questionnaire used in this 1990 study was administered to approximately 2,700 students and 1,300 teachers in urban, suburban and rural schools throughout Illinois. This survey focuses on self-reported incidents of school crime and perceptions of safety in the school and the local community. It gathers information about assaults, weapons possession, theft and other school crimes.

#### **Gun-Related Violence Survey<sup>10</sup>**

This extensive survey was developed by researchers at Tulane University as part of their efforts to better understand the impact of violence on inner-city youth. Youths answer questions about the firearms-related violence to which they have been exposed both in school and the community. Students are asked about gun possession, family and peer attitudes about guns, and victimization by guns. This is one of the better instruments that focuses specifically on the impact of children's exposure to guns.

#### **CTC Staff Training and Preparation Survey Instruments<sup>11</sup>**

The California Commission of Teacher Credentialing School Violence Advisory Panel developed a series of surveys designed to measure experiences and opin-

ions about school violence from both students and staff. A similar version requests parents' perceptions of the violence that occurs at their children's schools. Versions of the survey are available for use with students, school staff, parents, school board members, university professors and recently hired educators.

**A Survey of Experience, Perceptions and Apprehensions about Guns Among Young People in America<sup>12</sup>**

This survey was administered to 2,508 randomly selected students attending public and private schools throughout the United States. Funded by the Joyce Foundation for the Harvard Public Health Department, the survey was conducted during April and May, 1993. Students in grades six through 12 were asked questions focusing on their perceptions of school, family and community life. This is one of the better opinion-style questionnaires and includes both parent and student versions.

A cautionary note is that surveys such as this one often show that students express more concern about school violence for youth in general than for themselves personally. For example, 79 percent of the youth surveyed thought that most young people "are unsafe from violence in the schools," but only 14 percent felt that concern about violence personally affected their school work.

**Conducting school safety assessments**

The instruments listed above are among the most widely used to assess school safety and violence. They provide a good starting point for creating a local or regional school safety survey.

The following guidelines are presented to assist in the process of developing a local school safety survey.

- *Conduct the assessment within a planning process.* All evaluations should be done in the context of a careful, local school safety planning process. Data collected without a purpose serves no useful function; in fact, it may be misused. California's experience with mandated

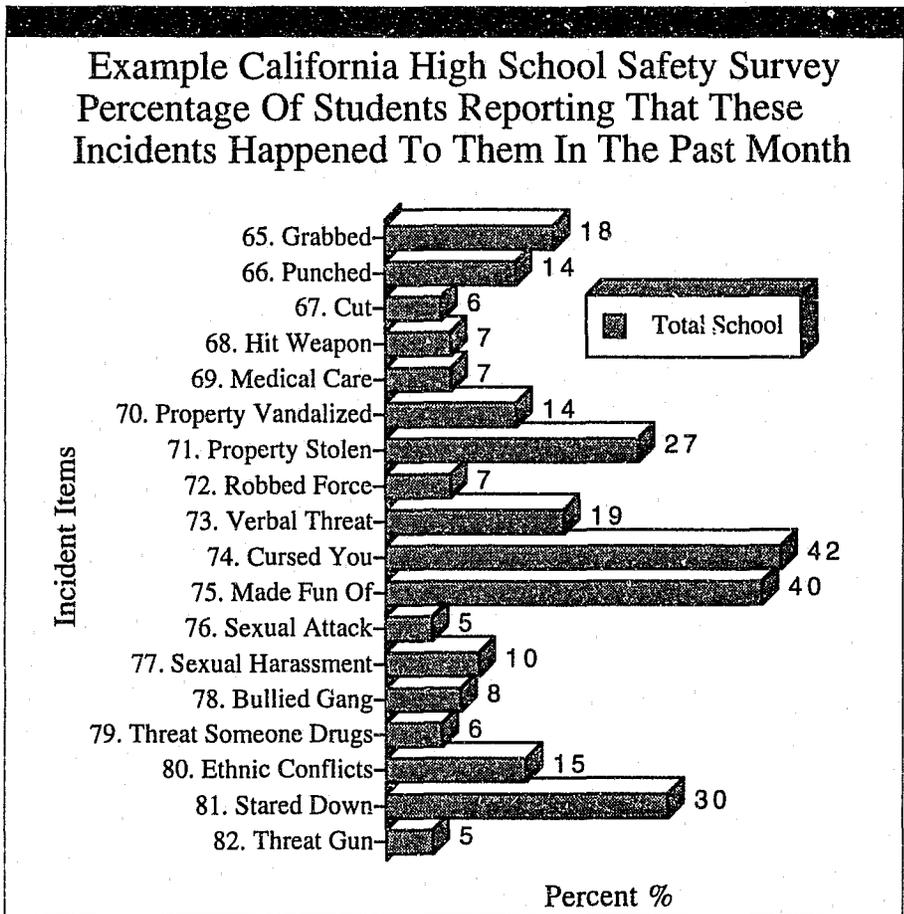


Figure 2

school crime reporting from 1985-1989 attests to this. (See related article on page 8.)

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention YRBS study of 1990, for example, asked high school students how often they carried a weapon in the previous 30 days. This survey was intended to measure youth violence in general, but since high school students were surveyed, the results were widely misinterpreted to reflect school behavior.

- *Select relevant instruments and questions.* The site-level school safety planning team should consider the types of issues and concerns that are most pressing on its campus. The selection of assessment instruments should be motivated by the committee's needs, not merely by what is most immediately available. If the planning team has reason to believe that weapon possession is a problem at school, then it will want to consider using an instrument such as the

National Adolescent Health Survey that asks detailed questions about weapons possession and weapons-related attitudes.

In contrast, other schools might identify pressing safety issues as students driving too fast in parking lots, interracial group conflict or bullying. These schools would be better served by assessing the overall climate of the school, using instruments such as the California School Climate and Safety Survey.

The experiences of California CTC School Violence Panel have shown that whenever possible, questions about student and staff experiences should be as behaviorally specific as possible. It is much better to ask if the individual has been "hit on the head by a club" than if he or she has been assaulted or in a fight. In the surveys conducted by the panel, a list of 19 descriptive incidents reflecting a broad range of levels of violence were used. (See Figure 2.)

Finally, assessments of large districts,

regional consortia or statewide information may call for the use of broad-based surveys such as the Youth Risk Behavior Survey.

- *Ask about everyone's experiences.*

Site-level school safety planning teams should consider asking for the views of as many students, teachers and parents as possible. It is important to keep in mind that local safety assessments are not driven by scientific issues, but by the need for information to construct the most viable safety plan. Asking for a variety of opinions has the added benefits of increasing the school community's awareness of safety issues, sending the message that safety is a top priority.

- *Talk about the survey.* The primary purpose of conducting safety assessments is not to obtain numbers to make graphs and blindly interpret the results. For this reason, safety surveys are most informative when they include procedures for discussing student and staff reactions. Classroom lessons, focus groups and community meetings are methods of obtaining more personal views of "what is behind the numbers."

Discussion is particularly important because it may be inappropriate to assume that everyone interprets a question in similar ways. For example, research has shown that men and women do not agree on all aspects of what constitutes violence. Women are more likely than men to consider the magnitude of the harm that was incurred when deciding whether an act is considered violent.

In contrast, men weigh the avoidability of the act. In other words, if an act was unavoidable (e.g., shooting in self-defense), then it was not violent. It will greatly enhance the safety planning process if time is taken to discuss reactions to assessment instruments, including the definitions used in the document.

- *Develop school/university safety partnerships.* School districts may not have the technical resources to process and prepare safety assessment results in an efficient manner. Districts are urged to develop partnerships with universities to assist in this process.

This is a particularly significant option because colleges and universities are involved in training future educators. Recent California legislation mandates that such institutions train teachers, administrators and support staff to more effectively address school safety and violence. Linkages with local universities serve as a resource for site-level safety planning teams and provide a meaningful context for university training.

- *Develop user-friendly reports.* Reports that are easily understood by nontechnical individuals should be produced. These will often include graphs to convey information.

### Proactive school safety assessments

Recent studies inform us about school safety and violence issues and influence public opinion and policy. The NIE study of the late 1970s found that 20 percent of the students reported being afraid at school. Another study by researchers at Texas A&M University found that 1.6 percent of students surveyed reported that they bring a gun to school *everyday*.<sup>13</sup> Figures such as these can motivate the public, legislators and educators to take action to improve school safety.

School safety, however, also must be evaluated in the context of broader social concerns and in light of local conditions and issues. A recent CDC report, for example, examined the responses of 1,399 New York City high school students. More than one-fifth of these students reported carrying a weapon anywhere during the previous 30 days, but the incidence of weapon carrying and gun possession inside the school was lower.<sup>14</sup>

No harm should come to anyone in a school. Nonetheless, crusader-like calls for action to stop school violence must be contextualized, as was done in the New York City study. As much as we decry the occurrence of violence on campuses, the information that is available suggests that schools continue to be protective settings for youth. To the extent that student self-reports are valid, weapons carrying, fights and threats are less likely to occur on school campuses than in other

community settings.

A comprehensive assessment of school safety must begin with an appreciation of the many studies and surveys that motivate us to action. However, they are not sufficiently informative to guide the actions of school safety planning at the local school site level. Each school must assess its own unique safety conditions prior to taking action. The instruments and procedures described facilitate this evaluation process. Information concerning how to obtain copies of the surveys is included in the endnotes.

### Endnotes

1. Bureau of Justice Statistics, *Criminal Victimization in the United States*, 1991, p. 3.
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5. Contact the American School Health Association, P.O. Box 708, Kent, OH 44240.
6. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 1990-1991 Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System, Atlanta, GA 30333.
7. U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Statistics, *School Crime: A National Crime Victimization Survey Report*, September, 1991, NCJ-131645.
8. Contact Dr. Rich Morrison, Ventura County University of California, Santa Barbara School Climate and Safety Partnership, VCSS, 535 East Main Street, Ventura, CA 93009.
9. Contact the Illinois Criminal Justice Office of Information Authority, 120 South Riverside Plaza, Chicago, IL 60606-3997.
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11. Contact Dr. Joseph Dear, California Commission on Teacher Credentialing, 1812 Ninth Street, Sacramento, CA, 95814-7000.
12. Contact LH Research Associates, Inc. 1270 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10020.
13. "Rural Communities Near Larger Metropolitan Areas: Safe Havens from Adolescent Violence?" Contact Dr. Paul M. Kingery, Texas A&M University, College Station, TX 77843.
14. *Morbidity and Morality Weekly Report*, "Violence-related attitudes and behaviors of high school students" — New York City, 1992, October 15, 1993, vol. 40, pp. 773-777.