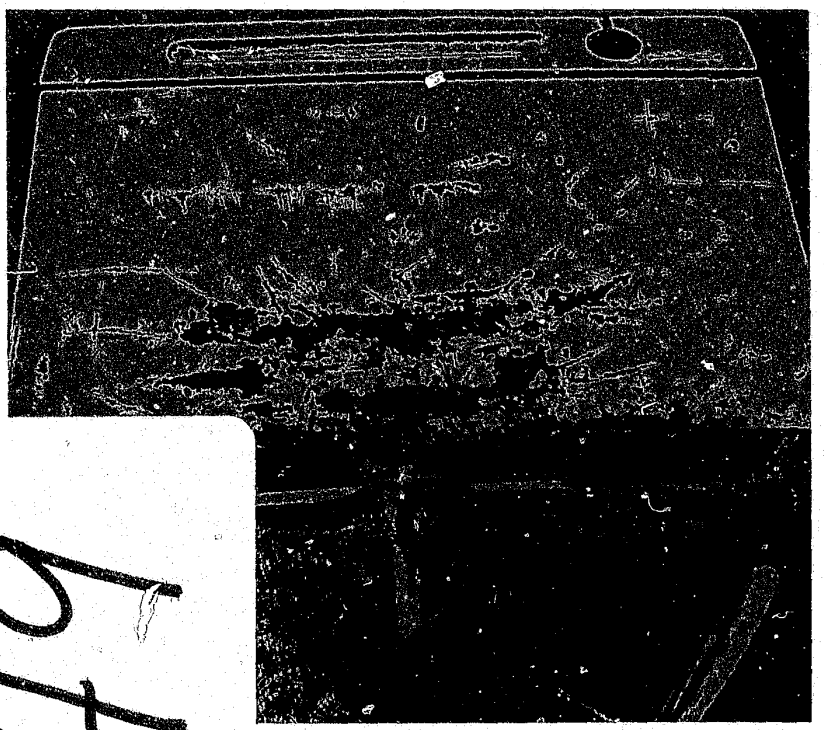
VIOLENT SCHOOLS — SAFE SCHOOLS

The Safe School Study Report to the Congress
Executive Summary



The National Institute of Education
U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare
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U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare
Joseph A. Califano, Jr., Secretary
Mary F. Berry, Assistant Secretary for Education

National Institute of Education
Patricia Albjerg Graham, Director

Executive Summary

In recent years, public attention has been focused increasingly on crime and violence in schools. Parents, teachers, and school administrators have all voiced their concern. Inquiring into the sources of delinquency throughout society, the Senate Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency has noted mounting evidence of school violence and vandalism. Yet organized data have not been available to describe the nature and extent of school crime and its cost to the nation.

To provide such information, Congressmen Bingham of New York and Bell of California introduced the Safe School Study Act in the House of Representatives. Following similar initiatives in the Senate by Senator Cranston of California, the Ninety-Third Congress, as part of the Education Amendments of 1974 (Public Law 93-380), required the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW) to conduct a study. The objectives of that study were to determine the frequency and seriousness of crime in elementary and secondary schools in the United States; the number and location of schools affected by crime; the cost of replacement or repair of objects damaged by school crime; and how school crime can be prevented.

METHODOLOGY

The National Institute of Education (NIE) conducted its study of school crime in three phases. In Phase I, a mail survey asked more than 4,000 elementary and secondary school principals to report in detail on the incidence of illegal or disruptive activities in their schools. Nine 1-month reporting periods between February 1976 and January 1977 (excluding summer months) were assigned to participating schools on a random basis.

In Phase II, field representatives conducted on-site surveys of a nationally representative cluster sample of 642 junior and senior high schools. Again, principals kept a record of incidents during the reporting month, and supplied additional information about their schools. Students and teachers were surveyed and asked to report any experiences they might have had as victims of violence or theft in the reporting month. In addition, they provided information about themselves, their schools, and their communities, which was later used in statistical analyses to sort out some of the factors that seemed to affect school crime rates.

Phase III involved a more intensive qualitative study of 10 schools. Most of the Phase III schools had had a history of problems with crime and violence, but had improved dramatically in a short time.

This report is based primarily on the NIE study, but it also includes information from a companion survey conducted in 1975 by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), and from other studies.

HOW SERIOUS IS THE PROBLEM OF CRIME AND DISRUPTION IN THE SCHOOLS?

There is no objective answer to this question, because no standards of overall seriousness exist to assess the problem. In this report we have used four different measures in an effort to characterize the seriousness of the problem.

Time Trends

Are crime and violence more prevalent in schools today than in the past? The evidence from a number of studies and official sources indicates that acts of violence and property destruction in schools increased throughout the 1960's to the early 1970's and leveled off after that.

The NIE Safe School Study data are consistent with these findings. Principals' assessments of the seriousness of violence and vandalism in their schools for the years 1971-1976 showed no overall change. In fact, they suggested some improvement in urban areas.

Risk to Students

Are students more at risk in school than elsewhere? An Analysis of data from 26 cities in the Law Enforcement Administration's National

Crime Survey indicates that the risk of violence to teenagers is greater in school than elsewhere, when the amount of time spent at school is taken into account. (Data from at least one other study support this finding.)

Although teenage youth may spend at most 25 percent of their waking hours in school, 40 percent of the robberies and 36 percent of the assaults on urban teenagers occurred in schools. The risks are especially high for youths aged 12 to 15: a remarkable 68 percent of the robberies and 50 percent of the assaults on youngsters of this age occurred at school. Only 17 to 19 percent of the violent offenses against urban youths in this age group occurred in the streets.

The Principals' Opinions

In a third approach to gauging the seriousness of school crime, we relied on the assessments of elementary and secondary school principals. Three-quarters of the principals surveyed responded that vandalism, personal attacks, and thefts were either no problem or only a small problem at their schools. Seventeen percent of the principals reported a moderately serious problem, 6 percent a fairly serious one, and 2 percent a very serious one. In all, then, 8 percent of all schools indicated a serious problem. This figure represents approximately 6,700 schools in the Nation.

The proportion of seriously affected schools is related directly to community size: the larger the community, the greater the proportion of schools having a serious problem. The proportions ranged from 6 percent of the schools in small towns and rural areas to 15 percent in large cities.

However, four of five schools are in suburbs or rural areas. Therefore, although cities had the largest proportions of seriously affected schools, suburbs and rural areas had the largest numbers of such schools. In terms of numbers, then, the problem cannot be seen as essentially urban.

Principals of secondary schools reported higher levels of school crime than those in elementary schools.

An Objective Measure of Seriousness

As a fourth measure of the seriousness of school crime, we arbitrarily decided that schools reporting five or more illegal incidents in a month's time could be judged as having a serious problem. The figures obtained in this way agreed substantially with those derived from the principals' reports.

EXTENT OF THE PROBLEM

The survey data permit an assessment of the risks of offenses against persons and against the school, and also indicate the prevalence of "victimless offenses," particularly drug and alcohol use. Because the figures presented are estimates from a sample, they inevitably contain some degree of error, and estimates of crime in particular are especially difficult to make with confidence. In the case of data from teachers and students, the estimates are probably somewhat high. Nevertheless, they give some idea of the dimensions of the problem.

Reports of Students

Theft is clearly the most widespread of the offenses measured. In all, 11 percent (2.4 million) of the Nation's secondary school students have something worth more than $1 stolen from them in a month. Most of the reported thefts involved items such as small amounts of money, sweaters, books, notebooks, and other property commonly found in lockers. Only one-fifth of the reported thefts involved money or property worth $10 or more. No significant differences were apparent between school levels, and differences among locations were not pronounced. Petty theft appears to be commonplace throughout secondary schools.

An estimated 1.3 percent (282,000) of secondary school students report that they are attacked at school in a typical 1-month period. The proportion of junior high school students reporting attacks was about twice as great as that of senior high students (2.1 percent vs. 1 percent). About two-fifths of the reported attacks resulted in some injury, but only 4 percent involved injuries serious enough to require medical attention. While the risk of minor attack is about the same in all locations, the risk of serious attack is greater in urban areas than elsewhere.

An estimated one-half of 1 percent of all secondary school students (112,000) are robbed in a typical month. (We use the term "robbery" as a shorthand reference for any act of taking something by force, weapons, or threats, including extortion and shakedowns.) The risks are again highest in junior high schools and in urban areas. Eighty-nine percent of the robberies involved no injury to the victim; 11 percent involved some injury, but only 2 percent of them were serious enough to require a doctor's attention.

For the typical secondary school student, then, we can estimate the risks as follows: he or she has about 1 chance in 9 of having something stolen in a month; 1 chance in 80 of being attacked; and 1 chance in 200 of being robbed.

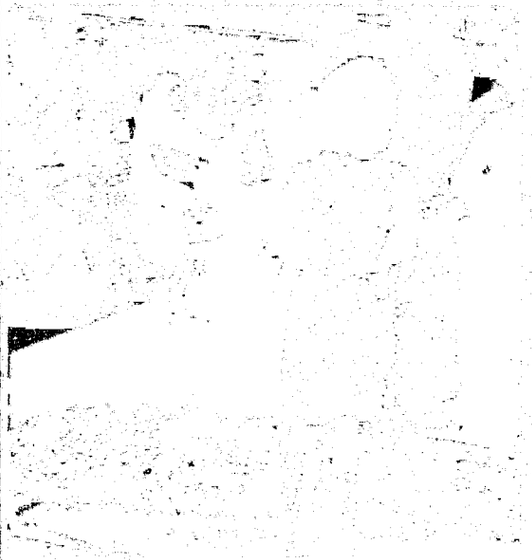
Reports of Teachers

In a typical month, an estimated 12 percent of the teachers in secondary schools have something worth more than $1 stolen from them, about the same proportion as students (11 percent).

About one-half of 1 percent of secondary teachers are physically attacked at school in a month's time. Although the proportion is small, it represents some 5,200 of the Nation's 1 million secondary school teachers. Nearly one-fifth of the attacks (19 percent) reported by teachers required medical treatment. This percentage is much higher than the students' 4 percent, indicating that attacks on teachers are almost five times as likely to result in serious injury. The proportion of teachers attacked declines as we move from larger cities to rural areas, and junior high schools show higher percentages than senior highs.

A little over one-half of 1 percent (6,000) of all secondary school teachers are robbed at school in a month. Once again, large cities show the highest percentages and rural areas the lowest.

From these data we can provide rough estimates of the risks faced by a typical teacher in the Nation's secondary schools: she or he has around 1 chance in 8 of having something stolen at school in a given month, 1 chance in 167 of being robbed, and 1 chance in 200 of being attacked.



Reports of Principals

Estimates of offenses against schools, rather than persons, come from the principals' reports, and are probably conservative. Most widespread are the property offenses—trespassing, breaking and entering, theft of school property, and deliberate property destruction, sometimes called vandalism. Of these, property destruction is the most prevalent. Typically, a school's risk of experiencing some vandalism in a month is greater than one in four. The average cost of an act of vandalism is $81. In addition, 1 in 10 schools is broken into, at an average cost per burglary of $183. Schools are about five times as likely to be burglarized as commercial establishments such as stores, which have the highest burglary rates reported in the National Crime Survey.

Estimates of the annual cost of school crime run from about $50 million to $600 million, with most estimates clustering in the $100-$200 million range. Our best estimate of the yearly replacement and repair costs due to crime based on NCES data is around $200 million.

LOCATION OF OFFENSES

Considering offenses against the school geographically, the risks tend to be higher in the Northeast and West than in the North Central and Southern States.

For property offenses, the risks to schools do not differ much throughout metropolitan areas--urban and suburban. Indeed, the per capita cost of school crime is higher in the suburbs than in the cities. Moreover, according to secondary school students, beer, wine, and marijuana are widely

available in schools throughout metropolitan areas, especially in senior high schools. School crime is not just an urban problem.

On the other hand, the risks of personal violence increase with the size of the community. And, in general, the risks of all types of school offenses are smallest in rural areas.

Both personal violence and vandalism are much more prevalent in secondary than in elementary schools. The incidence of property offenses is about the same in senior highs and junior highs, but personal violence is most pronounced in junior highs.

Reporting Offenses to Police

Only a small portion of violent offenses is reported to the police by schools. Of the attacks with injury recorded for the survey, only one-sixth were reported to police. Even when serious violence is involved, as with attacks requiring medical treatment, only about one-third of the offenses are reported. On the other hand, the majority of certain offenses against the school—especially burglaries—are reported. Of all offenses taken together, about one-third are reported to police.

Time and Place of Incidents

The risks of personal violence, personal theft, and disruptive/damaging acts against the school are highest during regular school hours and tend to occur more frequently during midweek. Four-fifths of all personal violence takes place during the schoolday. The risks of breaking and entering, on the other hand, are highest on weekends and secondarily during other nonschool hours. The occurrence patterns of personal and school property offenses tend to be complementary over days of the week.

For students, the classrooms are the safest places in school, considering the amount of time spent there. The risks are highest during the between-class rush in the hallways and stairs. Other places that pose substantial risks are the restrooms, cafeterias, locker rooms, and gyms.

VICTIMS AND OFFENDERS

With the exception of trespassing and breaking and entering, the great majority of all reported offenses in schools were committed by current students at the school. In most attacks and robberies at school, the offender is recognized by the victim. In three-fourths of all attacks and robberies of students, the victims and offenders were roughly the same age and the same sex. With minor exceptions, the risks of being a victim

of either attack or robbery in secondary schools declines steadily as grade level increases. Seventh graders are most likely to be attacked or robbed and 12th graders are least so.

The risks of violence are greater in schools whose student compositions are less than 40 percent white. However, our analysis shows that there is no relation between a school's racial/ethnic composition and the risks of violence there, once other factors, such as the amount of crime in the neighborhood, are taken into account.

Court-ordered desegregation is associated with some increased violence at first; but the data suggest that, after some initial trouble, things start to quiet down.

The majority of attacks and robberies of students at school involve victims and offenders of the same race. However, a substantial proportion is interracial (42 percent of the attacks and 46 percent of the robberies). For minority students the risks are higher in predominantly white schools (70 percent or more white); for white students, the risks are greater in minority schools.

OTHER FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH SCHOOL OFFENSES

Our statistical analysis has shown that several factors are consistently associated with school violence and vandalism, even when each is weighed against the others.

Neighborhood Factors

The crime rate and the presence or absence of fighting gangs in the school's attendance area affect its violence. It seems that the more crime and violence students are exposed to outside school, the greater the problems in the school.

A school's proximity to students' homes can make it a convenient target for vandalism. Also, the presence of nonstudent youth around the school increases its risk of property loss.

Schools having higher proportions of students from families in which both parents are present, and in which discipline is firm, suffer less property loss through vandalism.

Schools with higher proportions of male students suffer more violence, because boys commit more violent offenses than girls. Schools composed of lower secondary grades have more violence than those composed of higher grades.

Impersonality and Alienation

Larger schools, and schools with larger classes, tend to experience more violence and vandalism. It seems that when teachers and administrators can establish personal relationships with students, the risks of violence decrease.

In addition, students need to feel that their courses are relevant and that they have some control over what happens to them at school. Otherwise, their feelings of frustration can erupt in violence.

Incentive Structure

Academic competition seems to decrease a school's risk of violence while increasing the amount of vandalism. Competition for leadership positions also seems to increase the amount of vandalism.

These findings are not as contradictory as they seem. The data suggest that the violent students are more likely to be those who have given up on school, do not care about grades, find the courses irrelevant, and feel that nothing they do makes any difference. Such students might take out their aggression in random acts of violence against other students. Caring about grades can be an important step toward commitment to the school and to one's own future, bringing with it a reduction in personal violence.

Vandalism, on the other hand, is more likely to occur in schools where students consider grades and leadership positions important, and where students rebel against the unfair use of grades for disciplinary purposes. Unlike the violent students, those who engage in vandalism are more likely to accept the value of the school's rewards but, we suspect, are losing out or feel cheated in the competition. Feeling denied by the school, they take out their aggressions on it rather than on other students.

School Governance

A firm, fair, and consistent system for running a school seems to be a key factor in reducing violence. Where the rules are known, and where they are firmly and fairly enforced, less violence occurs. Good coordination between the faculty and administration also promotes a better school atmosphere. However, a hostile and authoritarian attitude on the part of the teachers toward the students can result in more vandalism.

Overall, the results of the analysis stress the importance of a rational structure of incentives, both positive and negative, that serve to increase student commitment and to structure perceptions, expectations, and behavior.

DEVICES, PERSONNEL, AND PROCEDURES TO PREVENT CRIME AND DISRUPTION IN SCHOOLS

Schools have responded to crime and disruption with a wide array of security devices, such as specially designed locks, window and door alarms, and complex electronic systems. Principals who have used such devices consider them generally effective, but they also rate some of the more complicated electronic systems as undependable. Security devices are most heavily

concentrated in urban schools, even though the risks of property crimes can be as great in suburban schools as in the cities. In terms of relative risk, suburban schools seem less well protected than urban schools.

Unlike the security devices, which are used primarily at night and on weekends, professional security personnel are employed during both school and nonschool hours. When school is not in session, they serve primarily to guard property; during the schoolday, however, they also help maintain safety and order in school. The skills required for the latter function are greater than those needed for guarding property; hence, school districts should recruit and train security personnel with particular care if they are to be used during the schoolday.

Principals who have employed security personnel, such as school security officers and police, rank them fairly high in reducing school crime; they also tend to rate them as more dependable (or less undependable) than the electronic security systems. Very few schools (1 percent, have regular police stationed in them, but the proportion is much higher in big city secondary schools (15 percent). School security officers are more widely used: they are present during the day in half of the junior highs and two-thirds of the senior highs in large cities. Even though junior high schools have higher rates of violence than senior highs, daytime security professionals are concentrated more in senior high schools. In terms of relative risks, then, junior highs seem to be getting a smaller share of these resources than they require.

Among the disciplinary procedures, suspension and paddling are the most widely used. No less than 36 percent of all secondary schools reported paddling students in a typical month. The practice is more prevalent in junior than in senior high schools and, unlike any of the other procedures, devices, or personnel, is most prevalent in rural areas: 61 percent of all rural junior high schools reported paddling students in a month's time.

While principals generally feel that they receive adequate support from other school authorities, parents, and police in handling discipline problems, they give the local courts very low ratings in this respect. Moreover, urban principals are much more likely than those in other areas to use security devices, security personnel, and disciplinary measures, but they are much less likely to say that they get adequate support from the school board and central administration.

Principals', Teachers', and Students' Recommendations

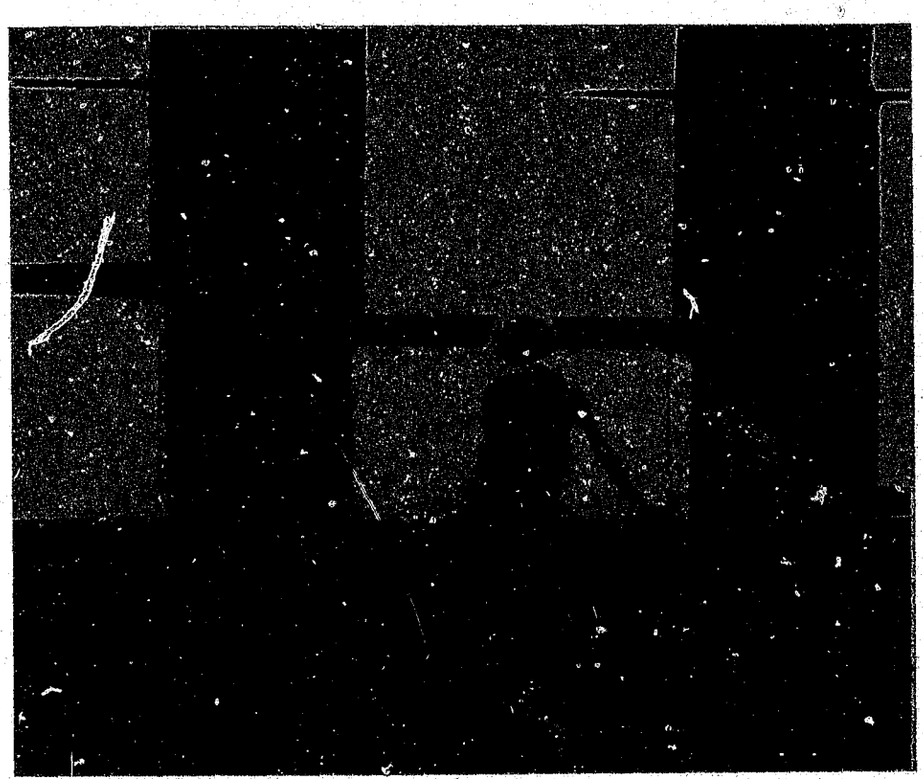
Students and teachers in secondary schools and principals at both levels were asked to recommend ways for schools to reduce vandalism, personal attacks, and theft. In addition, principals were asked to describe specific programs or measures they had employed and found successful in reducing these problems.

Of all the various recommendations, discipline was rated as being of prime importance. Indeed, with the exception of the successful practices reported by elementary school principals, discipline was ranked first by all groups of respondents: as a successful strategy by secondary school principals and as a general recommendation by principals at both levels and secondary school students and teachers.

When we consider the practices listed as successful by all principals—elementary as well as secondary—the use of security devices ranked first. However, these devices tended to receive middle-level recommendations from principals, teachers, and students altogether.

The use of security personnel was among the top three (out of eight) categories of successful practices listed by principals, and it received middle-level rankings from the principals, teachers, and students who were asked to make general recommendations. The use of security personnel was highly recommended by all groups of respondents in large city schools, where such personnel are most prevalent.

In all schools, training and organizational change, parental involvement, and improvement of the school climate were strategies also mentioned frequently.



THE CENTRAL ROLE OF SCHOOL GOVERNANCE

A central conclusion of this study is that strong and effective school governance, particularly by the principal, can help greatly in reducing school crime and misbehavior.

Throughout the Safe School Study, and especially in Phase III, the principal's leadership and his or her initiation of a structure of order seemed to differentiate safe schools from those having trouble.

The leadership role of the principal appears to be a critical factor in itself. Visibility and availability to students and staff are characteristics of the principals in Phase III schools that have made a dramatic turnaround from periods of violence.

Equal in importance to the principal's personal style of leadership, we found, was her or his ability to initiate a structure of order in the school. In every successful Phase III school, the system of governance could be characterized as "fair, firm, and, most of all, consistent." This finding complements a number of recent research findings that indicate that a consistent structure of order is an important determinant of success in many areas of education, from teaching reading to establishing a school climate conducive to learning.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

A number of themes run through the findings of the Safe School Study. As stated here, they represent the distillation of the answers to surveys and interviews with administrators, teachers, and students, and of our own observations in some of the Nation's schools.

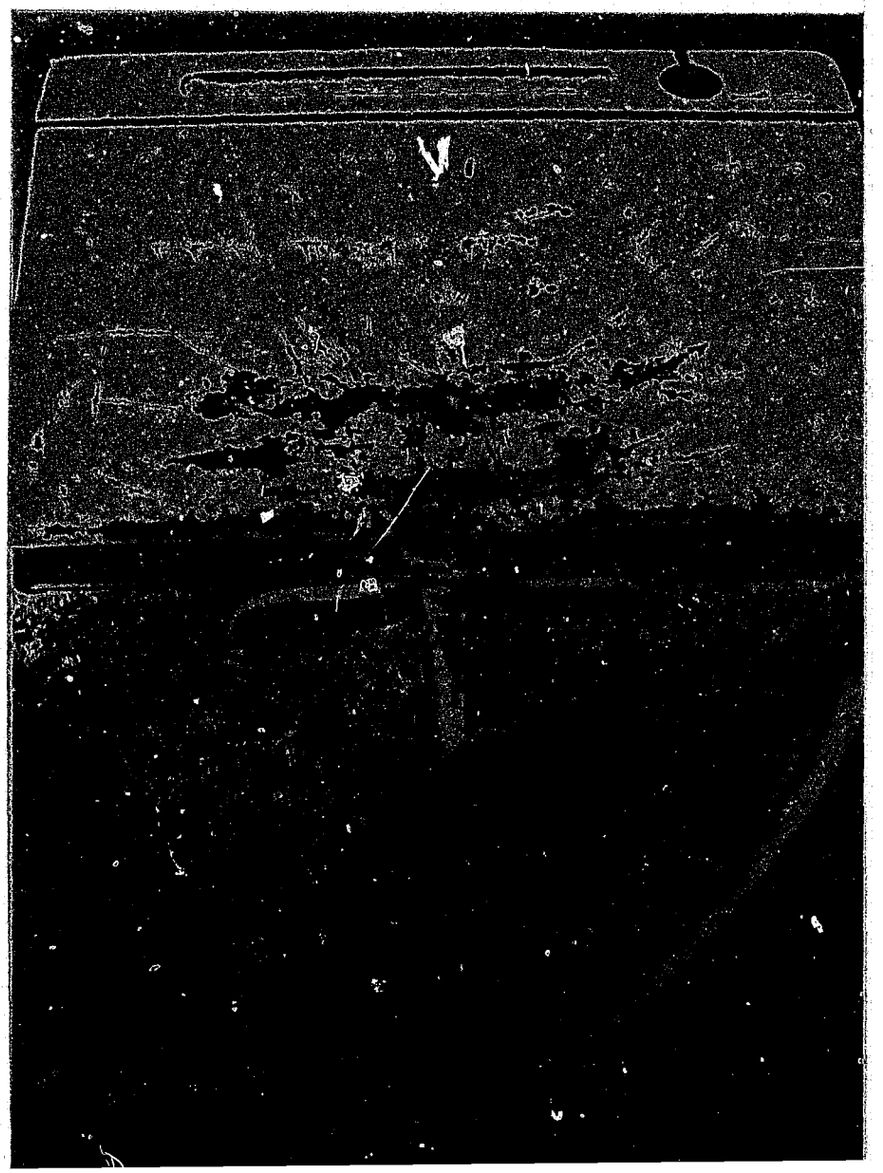
Although it does not appear that school violence and vandalism is getting worse, there is abundant evidence of a problem requiring policy initiatives. School crime and disruption should be recognized as a significant problem, one that must receive open attention and public concern. If a school district has reason to think that its schools might have serious troubles, it should assess the problem and give it primary consideration. Schools themselves can and should do a great deal to reduce crime and disruption, but an adequate program to deal with the problem requires the cooperation and resources that can come only through local planning supplemented by financial and technical assistance.

Schools should give particular attention to establishing effective governance programs, and to assuring a structure of incentives—such as grades and honors—that recognizes students for their efforts and achievements. This might mean rewarding students for diverse kinds of accomplishments, including individual improvement, and broadening the availability of rewards. Consideration should also be given to ways of decreasing the impersonality of secondary schools and increasing the amount of continuing contact between students and teachers.

Schools and their communities should recognize the key role of the principal in troubled schools, and give special attention to recruiting and training principals for schools that are seriously affected by crime and disruption. They should also provide the resources necessary for these principals to exercise a leadership role vis-a-vis students and teachers. One helpful step might be to provide principals with assistance in managing routine administrative matters, leaving them with more time to take leadership roles.

Teachers and other school personnel require pre- and in-service training for making schools safe. For teachers in seriously affected schools, intensive training in classroom management can be an important means of increasing their skills and effectiveness. Also, communities and their school districts can reduce violence by increasing the number of teachers in schools that are having serious problems with crime and disruption.

Security measures can also be helpful in reducing violence and property loss in schools, provided they are not used as a substitute for effective governance. School systems with serious problems of violence and vandalism can benefit from hiring additional security personnel with training in interpersonal skills as well as security functions. Schools with serious problems should give special attention to surveillance and traffic control in areas such as hallways, stairwells, and cafeterias, where violence and disruption are most likely to start. Security devices, if schools elect to use them, should be selected with care and with reference to their special needs. In addition, schools and school systems should coordinate their efforts with those of local courts; most also need to improve their recordkeeping and reporting problems to the police.



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HEALTH, EDUCATION, AND WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
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Harvey Marron
Project Director
National Criminal Justice Reference Service
Acquisition Report Department
Box 6000
Rockville, Maryland 20850

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