

SVRC

School Violence How Serious is the Problem?

In the past twenty years, national concern over school violence has reached epic proportions. Many schools have responded to this concern by implementing security measures such as surveillance cameras, metal detectors, armed guards, and zero tolerance policies as safety panaceas.

While action is certainly warranted, critics are questioning to what extent. Is it possible to create a school climate that is conducive to learning without being intrusive? The answer to this question is complex, just as school violence is a complex issue. Choosing methods to evaluate its prevalence and measure its scope accurately is, at best, difficult.

The National Center for Education Statistics' *Indicators of School Crime and Safety 2000* indicates that 12-18 year-olds were the victims of 2.7 million school crimes in 1998, including 252,700 non-fatal serious violent crimes.

Despite such staggering totals, crime rates are generally decreasing. Victimization rates for nonfatal serious violent crimes, nonfatal violent crimes, and theft declined between 1992 and 1998 for incidents both at school and away from school. Between 1995 and 1999, the percentage of students who reported being victims of crime at school decreased from ten to eight percent. The percentage of students fearing harm or attack at school declined from nine to five percent between 1995 and 1999. If school violence is *decreasing*, then why has media coverage and public fear of violence in schools *increased*?

The School Violence Resource Center, a component of the Criminal Justice Institute, University of Arkansas System, is currently conducting a research overview of school violence trends and perceptions. The Center's study will emphasize the following questions:

- ◆ **What do statistics reveal about school violence?**
- ◆ **How diverse is public opinion regarding school violence?**
- ◆ **Does statistical data support public perceptions of school violence?**

Answers to these important questions are critical in determining the scope of school violence. In a recent publication, *School House Hype: Two Years Later*, the Justice Policy Institute warns there is clearly a gap between what we know about the statistical reality of youth and school violence, what students think of their schools, and what Americans think is or could be happening in their children's schools. Are many of the policy changes being enacted across the country based on policymakers' sense of those adult perceptions and not actual incidence of crime or experiences of children in school?

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Interpreting Statistics and Understanding Perceptions of School Violence

The *Sourcebook of Criminal Justice Statistics* indicates that an overwhelming majority of teenagers and parents feel that schools are generally safe places. In 2000, 12 percent of students felt that their school was “not too safe” or “not at all safe,” an increase of only one percent from the previous year. These numbers were significantly lower than 28 percent reported in 1998.

In contrast, a recent Shell Poll reported that 32 percent of high school students feel that school violence is a “fairly” or “very serious” problem among peers. The percentage was higher in the South (40%) and among African-Americans (51%). Yet, within the same survey, 77 percent gave their high schools grades of “A” or “B” for “being a safe place, without violence.”

How should we interpret such conflicting findings? This ongoing issue perplexes many concerned with school violence. Depending on the source and the methods of research used, the numbers and percentages may vary.

This is important to consider because the general public tends to perceive school violence based on such data. Data collected from several Gallup polls indicated that the general public’s perception regarding crime and violence as the “most important problem facing the country” rose dramatically in the mid-1990’s after twelve years of low responses (3.5 percent on average). In 1994, 37 percent of the public was “most concerned” about crime. This percentage fluctuated between 1994 and 2000 and now stands at 13 percent.

In contrast, teachers’ perceptions of school safety differ somewhat from the general public’s. Nearly twice as many teachers viewed the school environment as very safe and orderly, and less than one percent of public school teachers were concerned about being physically attacked in and around their schools.

Conclusion

It is important to remember that ninety percent of our schools are free of serious, violent crime. School violence data indicate the probability of any student being killed (two in a million) or becoming a victim of violent crime (0.5 percent) is statistically small. Furthermore, data generally indicates that most students are feeling safer at school, and the incidence of crime has declined during the last decade, despite popular perceptions.

While our schools are among the safest places for students to be on a day-to-day basis, any school crime is too much. Awareness and fear about school crime remain high among certain segments of the population. A magazine headline recently asked the question, *Should We Arm Our Principals?* thus reflecting the type of issues that are currently being debated socially and politically. Questions such as this are causing many people to ask themselves, “Just how serious is this problem of school violence?”

Measuring the scope of school violence has been difficult, but with continued study and assessment, researchers hope to have a better understanding of youth violence and its

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effect on society. The current research overview being conducted by the School Violence Resource Center, to be released in Fall 2001, is expected to enhance this understanding.

This article was authored by Kurt Naumann, Research Specialist for the School Violence Resource Center, in collaboration with Larance Johnson, Director of the School Violence Resource Center, and Beth Stark, Publications Specialist for the Criminal Justice Institute.

The School Violence Resource Center was created to aid in the effort to reduce violence and violence-related behavior in our country's schools. Based in Little Rock, Arkansas, the Center provides specialized research, resources, educational programs, and policy development related to school violence issues. For more information about the School Violence Resource Center, contact the Criminal Justice Institute at (800) 635-6310, or visit its website at www.svrc.net.