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## **The Prevalence of School-Related Violence: An Overview of Statistical and Perceptual Data**

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# **Safe Schools Initiative Division Literature Review**

## **Program Summary**

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## **The Prevalence of School-Related Violence An Overview of Statistical and Perceptual Data**

### **Introduction**

During the past twenty years, national concern regarding school-related violence has reached epic proportions. Although recent statistics have indicated a decline in the incidence of school-related violence, media accounts of violent events, especially school shootings, continue to raise awareness and concern.

In response, public, private and non-profit organizations, such as the School Violence Resource Center, have committed considerable resources to reduce school-related violence. As these groups assess needs, formulate goals and design programs, one question surfaces most frequently: What are the differences in perception and bias regarding school-related violence?

The focus of this overview was an examination of recent qualitative and quantitative research to determine how school-related violence was both measured and perceived among various social groups. Emphasis was placed on review of sources that addressed the following questions:

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

The primary purpose of this overview is to enhance understanding of school-related violence among educators, students, parents, law enforcement officials, local

governments, community service organizations, and community leaders. Conclusions drawn from this research will be vital to the School Violence Resource Center in the design of future research projects, and in the development of curriculum designed to reduce school-related violence.

### **What is School-Related Violence?**

Definitions of school-related violence varied considerably, reflecting the distinct expertise, interests and academic disciplines of their authors. As the definitions below illustrate, no definitive definition of school-related violence was found. Because definitions often lack comprehensiveness and reflect author bias, they should be used as frameworks for analysis, not as comprehensive descriptors of physical and emotional behaviors.

Several definitions of school-related violence were very broad and difficult to operationalize. For example, Berg defined school-related violence as “the use or threat of physical force with the intent of causing physical injury, damage or intimidation of another person” (2000, p. 18). Astor and Meyer (2001) defined school-related violence as intentional and negligent behaviors causing physical or psychological harm and/or property damage. Furlong (2000) further expanded the scope of school-related violence to include any criminal acts and aggression that may inhibit learning and harm the school’s climate.

Other definitions were more precise, focusing on certain aspects of student behavior. Emphasizing a psychological perspective, *Early Warning, Timely Response: A Guide to Safe Schools* defined school-related violence as a “broad range of troubling behaviors and emotions shown by students-including serious aggression, physical attacks,

suicide, dangerous use of drugs, and other dangerous interpersonal behaviors” (Dwyer, Osher and Warger, 1998, p. 2). Elliott, Hamburg, and Williams, as reported in Danner and Carmody (2001), focused more on specific physical behaviors by defining school-related violence as “the threat or use of physical force with the intention of causing physical injury, damage, or intimidation of another person...this includes homicide, aggravated assault, armed robbery, and forcible rape...It also includes shoving, punching, hitting, and throwing objects when the intent is to harm or intimidate another human being” (p. 92).

A definition of school-related violence adopted by the California Commission of Teacher Credentialing (CCTC) provided an excellent framework for examining the comprehensiveness of school-related violence. According to the CCTC’s

*Recommendations for Reducing Violence in California Schools,*

Violence is a public health and safety condition that often results from individual, social, economic, political and institutional disregard for basic human needs.

Violence includes physical and nonphysical harm which causes damage, pain, injury or fear. Violence disrupts the school environment and results in the debilitation of personal development which may lead to hopelessness and helplessness (Dear, 1995, p. 2).

Noting substantial differences among functional definitions of school-related violence, Flannery and Singer (1999) proposed that any definition of school-related violence should progress along a continuum of grade levels because first graders rarely view violence in the same manner as twelfth graders. Because school-related violence is both comprehensive and varied along a continuum, it is the perspective of the School

Violence Resource Center that school-related violence is any school-related physical or psychological behavior that produces a victim.

### **The Scope of School-Related Violence: Criminal Incidence Data**

Ideally, statistics should inform, explain or perhaps enlighten. Unfortunately, statistics are often inconclusive, misleading, contradictory, and sometimes inaccurate. As evidenced below, statistical data varied greatly by source, reporting years, methodologies, interpretation and application. Because statistics are crucial to understanding school-related violence trends, formulating policies and designing programs, a major portion of this overview focused on school-related violence statistics.

Few comprehensive statistical sources of school-related violence existed before 1980. According to Furlong (2000), school-related violence research gained prominence in the 1980's when youth violence, particularly homicide, increased significantly. Government data sources such as the *Digest of Education Statistics*, the *Annual Report on School Safety*, the *Youth Risk Behavior Survey* and *Indicators of School Crime and Safety* are recent additions to traditional sources such as *Uniform Crime Reports* and the *National Crime Victimization Surveys*.

To understand the magnitude of school-related violence, one must first understand the scope of education. As reported in the *Digest of Education Statistics* (Snyder, 2001) approximately 25 percent of United States residents were involved in formal education as teachers, school administrators, support staff or students. In 2000, there were approximately 3.3 million teachers and 53 million students in elementary and secondary schools. Statistics indicated that the probability of any student being killed at school (one in two million) or becoming a victim of violent crime (less than 0.5 percent) was small. Furthermore, as the 1998

*Annual Report on School Safety* (US Department of Education, 1999) so succinctly cautioned, “in spite of recent school shooting tragedies, it is important to remember that ninety percent of our schools are free of serious, violent crime. While our schools are among the safest places for students to be on a day-to-day basis, any school crime is too much” (p. i).

*Indicators of School Crime and Safety 2000* reported that school-related crimes continued to decrease despite the fact that in 1998, 12-18 year olds were the victims of 2.7 million school-related crimes, including 252,700 nonfatal serious violent crimes. In fact, 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. In 1998, students ages 12-18 were twice as likely to be victims of nonfatal serious violent crime away from school than in school (Kaufman, Ruddy, Chandler and Rand, 2000).

Although statistically rare, school homicides received considerable media attention despite declining rates. Data from the National School Safety Center’s *School Associated Violent Deaths Report* (May, 2001) indicated that there have been 318 violent school deaths, 55 of which were suicides, since the start of the 1992-1993 school year. The total (20) for the previous school year was the lowest since 1994-1995 (21) and was considerably lower than the high of 56 in 1992-1993. Other sources reported slightly higher totals (Kaufman, et al., 2000).

Overall, juvenile arrest data mirrored the above trends. After peaking in 1993-1994, the statistical height of school-related violence, juvenile arrests have declined substantially.

- Since 1995, juvenile robbery arrests decreased 39 percent, matching 1970’s lows.
- Juvenile arrests for weapons possession dropped 27 percent between 1995 and 1999.

- Violent Crime Index offenses by juveniles fell 36 percent between 1994 and 1999.
- Juvenile homicide arrests fell 68 percent since 1993 to their lowest level since the 1960's.

However, some statistics were not as encouraging.

- Between 1990 and 1999, juvenile drug arrests increased 132 percent.
- Juveniles comprised one-quarter of all arrests for weapons violations in 1999.

Although declining significantly since 1993, rates were still 50 percent above early 1980's rates.

- Arrests for aggravated assault declined 24 percent since 1994 but were still 69 percent above 1983 levels. Simple assault rates were twice as high as 1981 levels.
- Total juvenile arrests in 1999, although nine percent below 1995 rates, were still cause for concern as more than 2.5 million juvenile arrests were made, accounting for 17 percent of total arrests and 16 percent of all violent crime arrests.

(Snyder, 2000).

### **The Scope of School-Related Violence: Self-Reporting Data**

Self-reporting data provided valuable insight into school-related violence incidents that were often unreported. *The Metropolitan Life Survey of the American Teacher 1999* (Binns & Markow) found that only one-third of student victims reported violent incidents to police or school officials. Thirty-five percent of students said they would never report violent behavior regardless of their relationship to the victim or perpetrator.

Self-reporting data also helped gauge the magnitude of incidence underreporting. For example, survey data reported that the percentage of students carrying weapons on

school property had declined every year between 1993 and 1999 from 11.8 to 6.9 percent (Department of Health and Human Service (DHHS), 2000). Compared to school expulsion data for firearm possession, which showed expulsion decreases from 6,093 to 3,523 between 1996 and 1999 (US Department of Education, 1999; US Department of Education, 2000), it can be inferred that the number of students possessing weapons (estimates range between 210,000 and 350,000) differed significantly from the number of students caught with weapons (Kingery & Coggeshall, 2001) and conclude that undetected weapons possession was substantial.

Self-reporting data also showed how incidence data differed from perceptions. Binns and Markow (1999) found that student, teacher and law enforcement perceptions of school-related violence were consistent with statistical decreases in crime rates; however, reported victimization data from the same survey contradicted these findings. Students were feeling safer at school and all three groups believed that school crime had decreased although self-reports of school crime by students and teachers had not decreased since 1993.

Some researchers maintained that self-reporting data should be used more extensively. Coggeshall and Kingery's (2001) analysis of the *Youth Risk Behavior Survey*, *Monitoring the Future Study* and the *National Crime Victimization Survey* yielded interesting results. Although the authors recommended a closer examination of student surveys in needs assessment and prevention planning, they did concede that survey instruments might have been sensitive to the mode of administration, the location of administration, and question phrasing, hence the wide variance of response rates across each of these surveys. Other critics urged caution. In regard to self-reporting data in

general, Furlong (2000) concluded, “Given that almost all basic information about the prevalence of school-related violence has been gleaned from studies that do not report using any response reliability or validity checks, it is likely that known rates of various types of school-related violence are overestimates of their true rates” (p. 8).

Surveys of teachers throughout the 1990’s indicated the presence, not prevalence, of school-related violence. *The 1993-94 Schools and Staffing Survey* (US Department of Education, 1997) found that 12 percent of all elementary and secondary school teachers reported being threatened with injury by a student while four percent reported actual attacks. Recent surveys found that 16 percent of teachers had reported being victims of school-related violence in 1998 (Binns & Markow, 1999). Generally, male teachers in urban and/or middle schools were most likely to be victims of school-related violence (US Department of Education, 1999; US Department of Education, 2000). Furthermore, middle school and high school teachers each perceived the risk of school-related violence as greater in middle schools than in high schools (Young, Sutarso, McDaniel & Craig, 1999).

*Violence and Discipline Problems in US Public Schools: 1996-97* reported that 57 percent of public elementary and secondary school principals reported at least one criminal incident to police, and ten percent reported at least one serious violent crime to police. Overall, 43 percent of schools reported no crime, 37 percent reported one to five crimes, and 20 percent reported six or more crimes. Weaponless attacks, theft and vandalism made up approximately 95 percent of reported crimes. High schools (Heaviside, Rowand, Williams & Farris, 1998) and larger schools (US Department of Education, 1999; US Department of Education, 2001) reported the most crime.

Survey data from the Centers for Disease Control's *Youth Risk Behavior Survey* (DHHS, 2000) found that students' fear of violence had increased despite reduced incidence of fighting. Between 1993 and 1999, fighting declined from 16.2 percent to 14.2 percent. However, the number of students who occasionally felt "too unsafe" to go to school increased from 4.4 percent to 5.2 percent.

Threats and bullying might have been to blame. For example, the number of students who were threatened or injured with a weapon on school property increased from 7.3 to 7.7 percent between 1993 and 1999 (DHHS, 2000). In both the 1993 and 1998 Metropolitan Life surveys, almost half of all students reported being pushed, shoved, grabbed or slapped in or around school with one-quarter of students reporting being kicked, hit or bitten (Binns & Markow, 1999). Peterson, Pietrzak, and Speaker, (1998) found that 63 percent of students had been verbally threatened during the past year, 28 percent had been physically threatened at least once during the past two years, and 16 percent had been verbally threatened six or more times in the last six years. Respondents reported that sexual harassment, kicking, pushing and the presence of knives, ice picks and razors had increased in their schools during the past two years.

A 1998 survey conducted by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development found that bullying was common with one-third of sixth to tenth grade students affected. Specifically, 30 percent reported occasional or frequent victimization or participation in bullying. Sixteen percent had been bullied during the school term, half of these at least once weekly (Tanner, 2001). These findings were consistent with earlier surveys that reported that almost ten percent of students had been threatened by someone

with a weapon at school, and that counselors had reported verbal bullying as the third most common problem that they faced (Serbalus, Schwartz, Vaughan, & Tunick, 1996).

In summary, self-reporting data provided valuable insight into unreported criminalization and victimization, and perceptions of school-related crime. Although perceptions of school-related violence were consistent with incidence data, self-reports of weapons possession and bullying were considerably higher than reported incidents. This finding was consistent with survey data that reported an increase in the percentage of students who occasionally felt “too unsafe” to attend school. Self-reporting data also found that most schools are free of serious violent crime. Only ten percent of schools reported one or more serious crimes to police. Furthermore, 43 percent of schools reported no criminal incidents to police.

Self-reporting data, however, are sensitive to modes and location of administration, question phrasing, and reliability and validity problems. Therefore, use of statistics should be preceded by careful analysis of survey construction and methodology.

### **Varying Perceptions of School-Related Violence**

Recent proliferation of surveys quantifying public perceptions of school-related violence gauged the opinions of thousands of students, parents, educators, and others across a litany of issues. As surveys differed, so did results. To aid our understanding, we classified survey data into four broad perceptual areas: the prevalence of crime in schools, perceptions of school safety, the likelihood of school-related violence, and perceived factors contributing to school-related violence. A brief summary of all perceptual data concludes this section of the overview.

### The Prevalence of Crime in Schools

Perceptions about the prevalence of school-related crime varied considerably among survey respondents. Generally, students and parents perceived school crime as more prevalent than school officials did. As reported in *The Metropolitan Life Survey of the American Teacher 2000*, 18 percent of secondary school students, 16 percent of secondary school parents and nine percent of secondary school teachers felt that keeping schools safe was the most important issue facing America today (Axelrod & Markow, 2000).

During the peak of school-related violence in 1993-1994, one-third of Americans believed that reducing violence was the top challenge facing public schools (Furlong & Morrison, 1994). Between 1995 and 1999, Gallup Poll respondents reported lack of discipline followed closely by fighting, violence, and gangs as schools' major problems. Students cited fighting, theft and vandalism as schools' greatest problems while drugs, social pressures, crime, and violence were their greatest individual concerns (Pastore & Maguire, 2000). Less than half of students saw drug use, vandalism, fighting, theft or weapons as occurring "quite a bit" or "very much" at school (Furlong, 1994).

Teachers' perceptions of school problems differed from the public's in general and students' in particular. A vast majority, 93.9 percent, of public school teachers felt that physical conflicts, robbery, theft, and drug and alcohol abuse were not serious problems in their school in 1993-1994. Teachers identified other problems, such as students being unprepared to learn, lack of parental involvement and student apathy, as

more prevalent (US Department of Education, 1997). Other surveys reported abusive language, failure to do homework, unexcused absences and vandalism ahead of threats of violence as major school concerns (Texas Kids Count Project, 1999).

Concern about physical conflicts and weapons possession increased significantly among secondary school teachers between 1990-1991 and 1993-1994. The percentage of secondary school teachers reporting weapons possession as a moderate or serious problem doubled over this period, while concern regarding physical conflicts increased by 50 percent. Percentages were double for large schools (750 or more students) versus small schools (150 or less students) (Rossi & Daugherty, 1996). Other surveys reported significantly higher rates of weapons possession, including one survey that reported rates in excess of 22 percent (Texas Kids Count Project, 1999).

#### Perceptions of School Safety

Perceptions of school safety varied considerably among survey respondents. Some differences might have been due to inconsistent definitions of safety. Some people may have limited their perceptions of “safety” to school-related violence while others might have included other factors such as school bus safety, accidents and building problems such as the presence of asbestos.

Sixty percent of Americans were concerned “a great deal” about school safety (Public Agenda Online, 2001). Ironically, an even greater percentage, seventy-one, believed that a shooting at their local school was likely (Brooks, Schiraldi and Ziedenberg, 2000). Although parents, students, school officials and law enforcement officials all worried somewhat about school safety, perceptions among each group differed considerably and little consistency was found within available data.

Wirthlin Worldwide (1999) reported that 18 percent of parents said their child had seen a weapon in school or in the community, and one-quarter worried “a great deal” about their children’s safety in school or in route to school. Lower income respondents tended to fear their children’s safety more than their higher-income counterparts. There was little difference among various age groups and degree of urbanization. Open-ended Gallup Polls, however, reported that forty-seven percent of parents feared for their children’s safety at school (Newport, 2000).

An overwhelming majority of students have historically believed their schools are generally safe. Data during peak school crime years, 1993-1994, (Furlong & Morrison, 1994) and recent data (Binns & Markow, 1999; Pastore & Maguire, 2000; and, Peterson, et al., 1998) indicated that between eight and 12 percent of students felt that they were “not too safe” or “not at all safe” at school. The percentage of students fearing harm or attack at school declined from nine to five percent between 1995 and 1999 (Kaufman, et al., 2000). A March 2001 ICR/ABC News poll of high school students found that 79 percent felt violence in their local school was “not too serious” or “not at all serious,” and 92 percent felt “very” or “somewhat” safe at school (Public Agenda Online, 2001). Seventy-seven percent of students gave their high schools grades of A or B for “being a safe place, without violence,” however, 32 percent felt that school-related violence was a fairly or very serious problem among peers (PR Newswire, 1999).

Perceptions of school safety differed considerably between school social workers and school psychologists. Twenty-one percent of school social workers reported that violence in their schools was a “big” or “very big” problem. Twenty-three percent reported a recent shooting or assault with a gun, and 13 percent reported a stabbing or

knife assault (Astor, Behre, Fravil & Wallace, 1997). Sixty-four percent of school psychologists worried “very little” or “not at all” about their personal safety at school, and less than two percent reported that their school had a “very big problem” with school-related violence. A majority of school psychologists reported that they had not been properly trained to respond to school-related violence (Furlong, 1994).

Data was especially mixed in regard to teachers’ perceptions of school crime trends. Pietrzak, Peterson and Speaker (1998) found that a majority of teachers at all educational levels except preschool felt that violence had increased during the past two years. Specifically

- 28 percent of preschool teachers saw violence increasing at their level.
- 56 percent of elementary teachers saw violence increasing at their level.
- 71 percent of middle school teachers saw violence increasing at their level.
- 66 percent of high school teachers saw violence increasing at their level.

Stetson, Stetson, and Kelly (1998) found that 85 percent of teachers felt that violence or civil disobedience had increased in their schools.

Comparative studies of school-related violence illustrated how diverse perceptions were among groups. Nearly twice as many teachers (43%) as parents (24%) viewed local school environments as very safe and orderly (Langdon & Vesper, 2000). Eighty-five percent of teachers yet only 67 percent of students were not worried about being physically attacked at school (Brooks, et al., 2000).

Perceptions of school-related violence also differed between students and parents. A recent poll by Time Magazine and the Discovery Channel, in conjunction with the National Campaign Against Youth Violence, found that the actual percentage of students

feeling less safe, witnessing violence and being insulted or threatened at school was significantly greater than the percentage of parents who believed such violence had occurred (Morse, 2001). Similarly, school administrators perceived school-related violence as less of a problem than students and believed that students were more satisfied with the treatment of victims and perpetrators of violence than students actually were.

### The Likelihood of School-Related Violence

After high profile school shootings, public perceptions regarding the likelihood of school-related violence showed dramatic short-term increases. For example, in mid-1999, immediately after the Columbine shootings, 71 percent of poll respondents felt that a school shooting was likely in their community, up from 49 percent the previous year (Brooks, et al., 2000). By November 1999, that number had declined to 52 percent (Schorr, 1999).

By 2001, percentages continued to decrease as 36 percent of adults said school shootings were “somewhat likely,” and 30 percent felt they were “very likely” (Public Agenda Online, 2001). Another 65 percent on March 9, 2001 felt that school shootings were “very likely” or “somewhat likely” in their community (Newport, 2001). Thirty-five percent of students felt that local school shootings were “very unlikely,” and another 35 percent said that they were “somewhat unlikely” (Public Agenda Online, 2001).

Students also perceived certain peers as likely to commit violent acts. One-third of students knew of a classmate troubled enough to stage a violent attack in their school; one in eight knew a student who had brought a gun to school; and ten percent of students had heard of a plan by one or more students at their school to shoot or kill classmates (Langer, 2001).

Teachers characterized likely victims of school-related violence as low income, racial minorities, low achievers, social outcasts and those with low parental supervision.

Students saw victims much differently as outcasts, homosexuals, boys, gang members and students with low self-esteem (Binns & Markow, 1999).

#### Perceived Factors Contributing to School-Related Violence

Gallup Poll respondents between 1994 and 1999 indicated that increased alcohol/drug use, breakdown in family structure and growth in gangs were the top three reasons for increased violence in public schools. Availability of weapons (fifth) and media portrayal of violence (seventh) were lesser factors. A majority of respondents believed lack of adult supervision, easy availability of handguns, and television and movies each contributed “a lot” towards violence. Sixty-two percent felt that depiction of violence in popular entertainment was a “major cause” of youth violence (Pastore & Maguire, 2000). Poor parent-teacher communication was cited in a survey of mothers as a leading cause of school-related violence (Kandakai, Price, Telljohann & Wilson, 1999), while 12 percent of the public cited lack of parental involvement as the major impediment to improving schools (Langdon & Vesper, 2000).

A study of middle school teachers by Pietrzak, et al., (1998) found a variety of school violence risk factors including lack of rules or family structure, lack of involvement or parental support, violence acted out by people, drug and alcohol abuse, violence in movies, television, and games, and poor self concept. Similar results were found by Stetson, Stetson and Kelly (1998) who listed lack of parental influence, television and the media, personal responsibility of the students, and gangs as major risk factors. The majority of teachers felt that schools in general were extensively responsible for the increase in school-related violence.

Perceptions regarding school shooting risk factors were more diverse. A study of students, teachers, and administrators at seven schools where school shootings had occurred between October 1997 and May 1999 found that conflict among social groups, lack of parental involvement and mental illness were major contributors to school-related violence (Lichter and Lichter, 1999).

Research on perceived gang and drug presence at schools, considered significant predictors of school-related violence, are also important. Between 1989 and 1999, the percentage of students reporting the presence of street gangs at school fluctuated considerably from 15.3 percent in 1989, to 28.4 percent in 1995, to 17 percent in 1999 (US Department of Education, 2000). It is likely that these statistics reflect the rapid proliferation of gangs in the early 1990's, followed by sharp reductions after 1995 as eradication programs began to achieve their goals. Drug use and availability data was most alarming. The percentage of students offered drugs on school property in 1999 reached an all-time high of 32 percent continuing a twenty-year trend of increases (DHHS, 2000).

*The Metropolitan Life Survey of the American Teacher 1999* also documented the increased prevalence of drugs as risk factors. Both teachers and law enforcement officials cited drugs and alcohol as the third leading cause of school-related violence, up 17 percent since 1993. Students listed drugs and alcohol as the second leading cause of school-related violence, behind only peer pressure. The number of students naming drugs and alcohol increased precipitously from 23 percent in 1993 to 39 percent in 1999.

Of concern too, are conflicting messages that kids may be receiving from parents. Ninety percent of mothers believed that their children would handle problems at school

without fighting, however, approximately 40 percent of mothers believed it permissible for children to fight in certain situations (Kandakai, et al., 1999).

### Summary of Perceptions

In summary, public opinion polls showed that Americans were very concerned about school-related violence, and worried considerably about the safety of school children. Sixty percent of the general public was concerned “a great deal” about school safety. Additionally, sixty-five percent believed that school shootings were “very likely” or “somewhat likely” in their community.

Generally, parents and students perceived school safety differently. Approximately one-half of parents worried “a great deal” about their children’s safety in school or in route to school. Conversely, 92 percent of students felt “very” or “somewhat” safe at school. Nearly twice as many teachers (43%) as parents (24%) viewed local school environments as very safe and orderly.

A majority of surveys found parental influence, alcohol and drug use, media portrayal of violence, availability of weapons, and gangs as perceived school-related violence risk factors. A majority of Gallup Poll respondents believed lack of adult supervision, easy availability of handguns, and television and movies each contributed “a lot” towards violence. Specifically, sixty-two percent felt that depiction of violence in popular entertainment was a “major cause” of youth violence.

### **School-Related Violence and the Media**

Why are there so many misperceptions, contradictory statistics and inconclusive findings? One possibility might be the dramatic rise in media accounts of school-related violence. There was a 50 percent increase in the number of newspaper articles about

school-related violence between 1992-93 and the entire previous decade (1982-1992). Many newspaper accounts consisted of unsourced statistics, uncredited anecdotes and unscientific public opinion polls designed to heighten attention to school-related violence (Bempechat, 2001).

A great example of false data is an infamous list juxtaposing school problems of the 1940's with school problems of the 1990's. According to this list, school problems have radically changed from talking, chewing gum, making noise, running in the halls, cutting in line, wearing improper clothing and littering to drug abuse, alcohol abuse, pregnancy, suicide, rape, robbery and assault. This particular source continues to be cited in articles and speeches by high-profile officials despite its exposure as a hoax (O'Neill, 1994).

The degree to which media affects the perceptions of school-related violence, not whether or not media influences violent behavior, was reviewed in the sources below. Many sources blame the discrepancy between reality and perception on sensationalized accounts of rare, violent episodes. Vincent Schiraldi of the Center on Juvenile and Criminal Justice believes that the public's tendency to gain knowledge of violence through media rather than personal experience may explain some anomalies, such as perceptions of rising crime when rates are down, and profound concern for the likelihood of violence when it is statistically uncommon (O'Brien, 2000; Brooks, et al., 2000). Some sources cited extensive news coverage of school shootings as possible reasons for such misperceptions (Morse, 2001).

Other sources contend that intensive media coverage of a few aberrations such as lethal violence in suburban schools or zero tolerance policies gone badly may have swayed public opinion simply due to their unusualness and newsworthiness.

Disproportionate coverage of juvenile crime may help stir fears of school-related violence. Kathryn C. Montgomery of the Center for Media Education estimates that 2/3's of media crime coverage is devoted to youth crime, although youth comprise only 1/3 of offenders. (Maeroff, 2000). A majority of principals felt that media coverage of school-related violence was "overblown" despite increased school-related violence at the time of that survey (Boothe, Bradley, Flick, Keough & Kirk, 1993).

Kunkel (1994) found that media coverage of children most frequently involved reports of crime and violence. Such coverage constituted 48 percent of all television stories and 40 percent of newspaper coverage. This coverage is not only negative, but can also be detrimental because it diminishes coverage of other child-related issues. Other critics' comments are more pointed. According to Dr. Dewey G. Cornell of the University of Virginia, "Media coverage of a few high profile cases generates great public fear and concern that can lead to misconceptions about the risk of youth violence and the safety of our schools. The facts are contrary to the public image...If one picture is worth a thousand words, unfortunately, one fear-arousing photograph seems to outweigh a thousand facts (Cornell, 2001, p. 1).

Danner and Carmody's (2001) research found several trends that supported media influence of public fear of crime

- The media affects public attitudes because 95 percent of the general population cites mass media as primary sources of crime information.
- Greater exposure to media may lead to inaccurate beliefs about crime.
- Heavy media exposure is linked to heightened fear of crime.

Newport (2001) found that parental concern for school safety had increased from 24 percent in 1978 to 37 percent in 1998, but has fluctuated considerably (up to 55 percent after the Columbine shootings and 45 percent after the Santee shootings) depending on news coverage. Polls also indicate that media portrayal of violence (38%) and coverage of school-related violence (32%) were “extremely” important causes of school shootings, behind students’ home lives (57%) and the easy availability of guns (46%).

### **Conclusions and Implications for Further Research**

Several conclusions can be drawn from this overview. First, the collection, analysis and reporting of data is greatly influenced by different methodologies and biases. Second, people’s definitions, perceptions and actual experiences regarding school-related violence differ substantially along a wide continuum of demographic, social and contextual factors. Finally, even though statistics indicate a significant reduction in the incidence of school-related violence, public fear and perception of rising school crime indicate that much more is unknown about school-related violence than is known.

We did find some answers to the original questions posed in the introduction to this overview. First, because school-related violence is both comprehensive and varies along a continuum, any school-related physical or psychological behavior that produces a victim can be characterized as school-related violence.

Second, school crime rates are generally declining. Students are feeling safer at school despite the fact that in 1998, 12-18 year olds were the victims of 2.7 million school crimes, including 252,700 nonfatal serious violent crimes. More significantly, children were twice as likely to be victims of nonfatal serious violent crime away from school than in school. Collectively, most types of school-related violence have significantly decreased

since peaking in 1993-1994. However, these rates are slightly higher than early 1980's rates. While Violent Crime Index offenses, especially homicide, are significantly lower, certain activities such as drug and alcohol use, bullying and weapons possession are actually increasing. Also increasing are teacher victimization rates.

Third, there was a great divergence of public opinion regarding school-related violence. Most survey respondents are greatly concerned about school-related violence and fear that a shooting is possible in their local schools. However, most groups perceive their local schools as safe. Generally, students, parents, school administrators and law enforcement officials believe that school-related violence has decreased although certain self-reports indicate stable rates. As a rule, those within the school environment (students and teachers) perceived schools as being safer than did parents, law enforcement officials or the general public as a whole. There was evidence, but not consensus, that media influenced many people's perceptions of school-related violence negatively. At least, public polls show heightened awareness of school-related violence following highly publicized events.

Finally, statistical data did not generally support public perceptions of school-related violence.

There is clearly a gap between what we know about the statistical reality of youth and school-related violence, what students think of their schools, and what Americans think is or could be happening in their children's schools. Sadly, many of the policy changes being enacted across the country are based on policymakers' sense of those adult perceptions, and not the actual incidence of crime, or the experiences of children in school (Brooks, et al., 2000, p. 12).

Astor and Meyer (2001) pointed out that a clear understanding of the scope of school-related violence remains a subject of debate largely because results of opinion polls portrayed conflicting perceptions of school-related violence. The authors maintained that school-related violence was a multifaceted problem that included often-overlooked contextual factors (i.e., physical locations, times, social situations, etc.) that were misinterpreted, over-generalized, or overlooked in school-related violence assessments. Further, how survey respondents evaluated the severity, frequency and subjectivity (what constitutes violence) affected their overall assessments of violent behavior at schools and affected perceptions. Finally, ambiguous questions, so common in risk and victimization surveys, further enhanced subjectivity. Thus, relying solely on frequency counts and polls and surveys did not adequately define the depth and meaning of violence within particular school contexts and may have led to such misunderstanding (Furlong, 2000).

While a majority of teachers (66%), students (62%), and law enforcement officials (60%) believed that existing school-related violence prevention efforts were adequate (Binns & Markow, 1999), a sizeable minority disagreed.

The School Violence Resource Center is committed to developing partnerships, policies, procedures and programs that will effectively reduce school-related violence. Although school-related violence has declined since peaking in 1993-1994, we must continue to seize the initiative and address underlying behaviors that cause youth violence. Based on the findings of this overview, our staff will continue research that addresses pertinent school-related violence issues by

- Conducting focus groups to gather primary data from stakeholders to better understand issues and concerns related to school-related violence, and determine what data products and services need to be provided.
- Further developing our School Violence Resource Center Web page, <http://www.svrc.net/> as a comprehensive source of school-related violence information.
- Examining school-related violence risk and protective factors to determine why some students have a greater propensity for violence.
- Evaluating existing school-related violence prevention, intervention and diversion model programs to determine applicability and effectiveness.
- Developing school-related violence curriculum, fact sheets and briefing papers.

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