What Is the Extent of the Problem of School Violence?

Inconsistent definitions, inadequate reporting, and a lack of research on issues such as bullying and verbal harassment limit our understanding of violence in U.S. schools. Nonetheless, this document highlights some of the key information we do have about the problem of school violence.

Are Schools Safe?

Despite recent sensational incidents of school violence and the increased perception of danger, most children are safer in school than out of it. Fatal incidents of school violence remained relatively uncommon in 1999, with the odds of dying a violent death in school being one in two million. In addition, most injuries that occurred at school were unintentional, not the result of violence.

However, while homicide remains very uncommon in schools, it is important to recognize that some schools struggle against serious issues of crime and violence and in such schools, the fears of students, teachers, and parents are real. School violence interferes with schools’ ability to carry out their fundamental academic mission by creating a pervasive climate of fear and generating a significant amount of stress for students, reducing their attendance and inhibiting their learning when they are in school.

Violence in Schools: How Bad Is the Problem?

- During the 1996-97 school year, more than half of all U.S. public schools reported experiencing at least one crime incident, and 1 in 10 reported at least one serious violent crime.
- Although fewer school-associated violent deaths have occurred in recent years, the total number of multiple victim homicide events has increased, from 2 events in 1992-93 to 5 events in 1997-98.
- Even though gun use and lethal violence declined during the 1999-2000 school year, the proportion of students who were injured with a weapon at school remained as high in 2000 as it was during 1983-1993, when the epidemic of youth violence was at its peak.
- During the 1996-97 school year, assaults were the third most frequent cause of injury in the school environment, after falls and sports-related injuries.
- The 1999 U.S. Youth Risk Behavior Survey reported that 14.2% of students nationwide had been in a physical fight on school property one or more times during the preceding 12 months.

Bullying/Harassment/Teasing

- In a 1998 survey, 10.6% of students reported that they had been bullied “sometimes” or “weekly”. Thirteen percent reported bullying other students, and 6.3% reported being both a perpetrator and a target of bullying.
- Surveyed students cited belittling insults about looks or speech as a common form of bullying they experienced.
- Male students were more likely to report being bullied, or bullying other students than females.
Girls were more likely to report being bullied with derogatory rumors or sexual remarks. Boys more commonly reported being slapped, hit, or pushed.8

Who Are the Victims of Violence in Schools?
- Middle schools and high schools experience more of a problem with crime and violence than elementary schools, according to a 1996-97 survey.3
- Students ages twelve to eighteen were victims of more than 2.7 million total crimes at school in the 1999-2000 school year, with students under age fourteen being more likely to be crime victims.8

What Is the Impact of School Violence?

Fear
- During the 1997-98 school year, 8% of students in urban junior and senior high schools reported missing at least one day of school each month because they were afraid to attend.9
- During the 1999-2000 school year, 25% of all high school students reported that they were afraid of in-school violence.10

Weapons and Gangs
- The 1999 U.S. Youth Risk Behavior Survey found that 20% of U.S. high school students said they had carried a weapon (e.g., gun or knife) at least once in the preceding month.11
- During the 1999-2000 school year, 37% of students reported that gangs were present in their school.11
- The number of youths involved with gangs has not declined since 1996 and remains near peak levels.4

Medical Costs and Loss of School Funding
- Schools lose funding for each day that students miss classes, a factor that can significantly affect schools that are already resource-poor.

Why Don’t We Know More About the Prevalence of School Violence?
- Only 9% of violent crimes against teenagers that occurred in school are reported to the police, compared to 37% of such crimes that occur on the street.12
- School principals significantly underreport the presence of weapons in their schools. According to a report issued by the Hamilton Fish Institute on School and Community Violence at George Washington University, there are a hundred times more guns in the hands of children attending U.S. schools than school principals reported to Congress.13

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6 U.S. Youth Risk Behavior 1999 Survey. Division of Adolescent and School Health, National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion.


