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REPORT

Summary of School Safety Statistics

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COMPREHENSIVE
SCHOOL
SAFETY
INITIATIVE

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NIJ's Comprehensive School Safety Initiative

The Comprehensive School Safety Initiative (CSSI) is a research-focused initiative that brings together the nation's best minds to increase the safety of schools nationwide. The initiative was a response to disturbing, high-profile incidents of school violence. Schools are mostly safe places — but when violence does occur, it can have far-reaching ramifications. CSSI is an investment in developing knowledge about the root causes of school violence, developing strategies for increasing school safety, and rigorously evaluating innovative school safety strategies through pilot programs.

CSSI projects aim to:

1) Identify and understand the potential root causes and consequences of school violence and its impact on school safety.

2) Increase the safety of schools nationwide by developing a solid foundation of knowledge and best practices that can be sustainably implemented through individualized school safety programs, policies, and activities.

3) Help identify matters internal and external to the school that may result in harm to students, teachers, staff, and schools.

4) Implement programs, policies, and practices that improve school safety and climate, focus on the school environment, or enhance educational and other outcomes for students and schools.

5) Identify effective strategies to respond to and resolve safety issues faced by schools and students.

6) In collaboration with key partners from education, law enforcement, behavioral/mental health, and social work, develop and test a comprehensive framework for school safety.

The initiative is focused on K-12 public schools, including public charter schools. CSSI projects require close collaborations between educators, researchers, and other stakeholders in the school community to ask the right questions, prioritize challenges, identify solutions, collect data, and make sense of the findings.

Through projects funded under the CSSI, NIJ works to produce knowledge that can be applied to school safety across the nation and for years to come. Please see the NIJ website for more detailed information on the initiative.

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Summary of School Safety Statistics

Fact or fiction?

Several high-profile incidents of violence at U.S. schools have, understandably, raised concerns about the safety of students while at school. Just one incident of violence causes significant harm. In light of this, it is important to examine commonly held beliefs about school safety and violence because they sometimes reflect a misperception or misunderstanding of what is actually happening. The following questions examine several common beliefs pertaining to school safety statistics and provide evidence to support or dispel each of them. Though improved understanding alone will not allay fears about school violence, hopefully this examination will facilitate informed discussions about school safety.

Data collected by federal agencies, including the Department of Education and Department of Justice, as well as research by school safety experts, can be used to address common school safety beliefs and explore several myths.

Is school crime increasing?

On the national level, crime at K-12 schools in the U.S., including violent crime, decreased from 1992 to 2013. Though violent crime against students increased from 2010 to 2013, the violent crime rate in 2013 was still lower than in 1992. Students' fear of being harmed has also decreased since the 1990s, based on data collected from school administrators and students over the past several years.

- Between 1992 and 2013, there was a decrease in the rates of students ages 12-18 who reported being victims of crime while at school. The total student victimization rate, including violent crime and thefts, declined 70 percent: from 181 per 1,000 students in 1992 to 55 per 1,000 students in 2013. The rate of violent victimization at school also declined from 1992 to 2013 (68 per 1,000 students in 1992 to 37 per 1,000 in 2013).

However, total student violent victimization at school increased between 2010 and 2013 (from 17 to 37 per 1,000 students).[1]

- Though most schools report at least one violent crime per school year, serious violent crimes at schools occur in far fewer schools. In 2013-2014, about 13 percent of public schools reported one or more serious violent incidents[2] to the police.

- Between 1995 and 2013, the percentage of students who reported being afraid of attack or harm at or on the way to and from school decreased from 12 percent to 3 percent. However, some students are more fearful than others. In 2013, black, Hispanic, and urban students were more fearful than white and suburban students.[3]

Overall, school crime has decreased since the early 1990s. However, the amount of crime has varied by crime type over time, and some schools have more crime than others.

Have school shootings increased?

Though there have been a number of high-profile school shootings in the U.S. over the past several years, homicides at schools are rare. Further, today's students are less likely to be threatened or injured with a weapon (such as a gun, knife, or club) at school than 10 years ago.

- Between 2003 and 2013, fewer students ages 12-18 reported being threatened or injured with a weapon on school property: 9 percent in 2003 to 7 percent in 2013.[4] Related to this, between 1993 and 2013, fewer students in grades 9-12 reported carrying a weapon on school property (weapon carrying in the previous 30 days declined from 12 to 5 percent). Over the same time, fewer students reported carrying a weapon anywhere, including at school.[5]

- Since 1992, the percentage of youth homicides occurring at school has been less than 3 percent of the total number of youth homicides.[6] Between July 1, 2012, and June 30, 2013, 41 school-associated homicides of students, staff, and nonstudents occurred at elementary and secondary schools. Of these 41 homicide victims, 31 were students.

Currently available data on school homicides and weapon injuries do not permit reporting of trends in the number of shootings at K-12 schools in the U.S.[7] This means it is not currently possible to report on whether school shootings have increased, but student weapon carrying and weapon-related injuries have decreased. There has been no change in the proportion of youth homicides occurring at school.

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[1] School Crime Supplement to the National Crime Victimization Survey, 1999-2013, in Zhang et al., 2016.

[2] "Serious violent incidents" include rape, sexual battery other than rape, physical attack or fight with a weapon, threat of physical attack with a weapon, and robbery with or without a weapon.

[3] School Crime Supplement to the National Crime Victimization Survey, 1999-2013, in Zhang et al., 2016.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Youth Risk Behavior Survey, 1993 to 2013, in Zhang et al., 2016.

[6] School-Associated Violent Death Study, 1992-2012, in Zhang et al., 2016.

[7] Starting with the 2015-2016 school year, the U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, began collecting annual data on school shootings from all K-12 schools in the U.S. (U.S. Department of Education, 2016).

Is violence at school a new phenomenon?

School violence is not new, but national data collection on school violence did not begin until 1989.

A look at school violence research since 1970 suggests that research interest began in earnest in the 1980s and culminated with the addition of the School Crime Supplement (SCS) to the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS).[8] Thus, national estimates on school violence began following the 1989 SCS data collection.[9] Broad public interest in school violence likely occurred some years later. The 1999 shooting at Columbine High School stirred up a great deal of media reaction, parental concern about school violence, and security responses by schools.[10]

The lack of national school violence data before 1989 and the widespread concern following the 1999 Columbine shooting may have prompted the idea that school violence is a new phenomenon. However, school violence is not so much new as it is something that has gained attention in the past 20 years or so.

Are school shootings an urgent concern to school officials?

School officials appear to be more concerned with school shootings today than several years ago. No national data exist on how concerned school officials are about shootings, but national surveys and other research provide some information on this issue.

The use of school security measures appears to have increased since 1999:

- After the 1999 shooting at Columbine High School, a small number of studies show that schools increased visible security measures to respond to parents' fears of another shooting.[11]

- Since 1999, students ages 12-18 have reported increased use of security guards and police, locked entrance/exit doors, security cameras, and requirements for visitors to sign in when entering. However, student reports of staff hallway supervision, metal detectors, or locker checks changed little during this time.[12]

School safety and security measures are pervasive, but factors such as the school location and the population served by the school increase the likelihood that it uses such measures.

- In 2013, over 99 percent of 12- to 18-year-old students reported at least one security measure at their school. Over 90 percent of students reported that their school had a written code of conduct, a requirement that visitors sign in, and staff hallway supervision. Only 11 percent reported that their school used metal detectors.[13]

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[8] Furlong and Morrison, 2000.

[9] The first SCS occurred in 1989 with the National Crime Survey (NCS). The NCS was reorganized and renamed the NCVS in the early 1990s. The next SCS data collection occurred in 1995 as a supplement to the National Crime Victimization Survey.

[10] Addington, 2009.

[11] Addington, 2009; Crepeau-Hobson et al., 2005; Snell et al., 2002.

[12] School Crime Supplement to the National Crime Victimization Survey, 1999-2013, in Zhang et al., 2016.

[13] Ibid.

- Most schools control access to school buildings during school hours (in the 2011-2012 school year, 88 percent of public schools and 80 percent of private schools had controlled access).[14]

- Use of safety and security measures varies by the student population served (e.g., age served, poverty rate) and school characteristics.[15] For example, city public schools are more likely than public schools elsewhere to control access to school grounds during school, require student uniforms, enforce a strict dress code, require student identification, and conduct student metal detector checks. Many safety and security measures are more prevalent in public schools where poverty is more common.

Together, these findings suggest that school officials have become more concerned about school safety and security over the past several years, in part because of high-profile school shootings. Most schools currently use at least one safety or security measure. Though several factors influence whether and what safety and security measures schools use, some have become more popular in the past several years.

Could a school shooting or other traumatic event happen in my school?

It is not uncommon for students to experience a traumatic event at school, for instance, a shooting, natural disaster, fire, pandemic, homicide, suicide, or intense bullying.[16] The chance of exposure to a traumatic event varies by the type of event. The likelihood of a violent death at school, such as a shooting, is rare. However, in some states, being threatened or injured with a weapon is more likely than in others. Bullying impacts many students on a regular basis.

National data on different kinds of traumatic events indicate how often they occur at schools or impact students:

- Violent deaths at schools are rare. Of the 53 student, staff, and nonstudent school-associated violent deaths between July 1, 2012, and June 30, 2013, 41 were homicides, 11 were suicides, and one was a death caused by a law enforcement officer.[17]

- In 2013, the percentage of public school students who, in the last 12 months, reported being threatened or injured with a weapon at school varied by state, ranging from 4 percent in Wisconsin and Massachusetts to 11 percent in Louisiana and Arkansas.[18]

- During the 2013-2014 school year, 16 percent of public schools reported that bullying among students occurred at least weekly.[19]

- During the 2012-2013 school year, 21.5 percent of students reported being bullied at school.[20]

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[14] Schools and Staffing Survey, 2011-2012 school year, in Zhang et al., 2016.

[15] Zhang et al., 2016.

[16] U.S. Department of Education, 2013.

[17] Zhang et al., 2016.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Ibid.

- In 2015, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) recorded 79 disaster declarations in the United States.[21] FEMA and other federal agencies are concerned about how these disasters and other events may impact students and have issued guidance to address this.[22]

- No national estimates exist on the likelihood that a student will be exposed to a traumatic event at school. However, the American Psychological Association reports that exposure to traumatic events is common for children in the United States; about half experience such an event.[23]

Shootings are just one of many traumatic events that students may face at school. A precise estimate of the chance that a school will have student(s) exposed to a traumatic event in a school year cannot be given. However, the data suggest that traumatic events at school are not rare.

Are most threats of violence made using social media?

It is unknown whether school violence threats are typically made using social media or some other means. There are national data on student bullying and harassment, and some statewide research on social media and electronic devices used to make threats (including violent threats) at and away from school. These data indicate that threats, bullying, and harassment occur both in person and via various technologies, including social media.

- In the 2013-2014 school year in Virginia, approximately 63 percent of threats by students at school were made verbally and directly to the person (e.g., in person). This was the most common way to deliver a threat. Approximately 6 percent of cases used electronic means (e.g., text or email) to make a threat.[24]

- Nationally, just under 7 percent of students reported being cyber-bullied[25] at or away from school in 2013.[26] During the 2012-2013 school year, 21.5 percent of students reported being bullied at school.[27]

- Of youth ages 10-20 who were harassed[28] by peers over the past year, 54 percent were harassed in person only, 31 percent were harassed both in person and via technology (e.g., text message, social media), and 15 percent were harassed using only technology.[29] In-person-only harassment decreased as youth got older. Youth older than age 12 were

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[21] U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Federal Emergency Management Agency, 2016.

[22] U.S. Department of Education, 2013.

[23] American Psychological Association, 2009.

[24] Cornell et al., 2015.

[25] Per Zhang and colleagues (2016), cyber-bullying is bullying by a peer that occurred anywhere via electronic means, including the internet, e-mail, instant messaging, text messaging, online gaming, and online communities.

[26] Zhang et al., 2016.

[27] Ibid.

[28] An incident could include multiple communications about the same topic.

[29] Mitchell et al., 2016. For this national telephone survey, youth were surveyed in 2013 and 2014 about incidents occurring at any location, including school.

more likely to use technology to harass peers (61 percent of those age 12 or younger reported in-person-only harassment compared to less than 20 percent of older youth).

There is not enough information to state whether social media is the primary vehicle for making school violence threats.

Conclusion

A great deal of information is available to help understand how violence, bullying, and crime impact schools and students. This information can be used to shed light on common perceptions related to school safety.

Exposure to traumatic events at school is not new or rare in the U.S. Although homicides and threats with weapons remain uncommon at schools, bullying at schools is a regular occurrence. Social media is used to make threats to schools and students, but it is unknown whether it plays a bigger role in making threats than more traditional means.

Data and information on school safety and violence are generally available at the national level. Violence exposure and concerns about school safety vary by the school's location and students' characteristics.

Recent high-profile shootings at school have contributed to concerns about school safety and are related to decisions to increase school safety and security precautions. The extent to which schools employ these precautions varies, but their use is common.

In light of recent school safety incidents, it is understandable that people would develop beliefs about trends and safety issues at the nation's schools. It is helpful to examine these beliefs and consider to what extent they reflect reality. There are some beliefs without sufficient information to support or dispel them.

The author hopes that this report helps contribute to a more informed dialogue as the nation works to keep schools safe.

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Appendix: National Data Collections

Indicators of School Crime and Safety (http://nces.ed.gov/programs/crimeindicators) is an annual report, jointly published by the U.S. Departments of Education and Justice, that summarizes data from relevant national data collections.

The *School Survey on Crime and Safety* collects data from a nationally representative sample of about 3,500 public elementary and secondary schools in the United States. Data have been collected six times since the 1999-2000 school year.

The *School Crime Supplement* to the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS) is a national survey of approximately 6,500 students ages 12-18 in U.S. public and private elementary, middle, and high schools. Data collection began in 1995; data are collected about every two years. The precursor to the NCVS, called the National Crime Survey, collected the School Crime Supplement in 1989.

The *Schools and Staffing Survey* (SASS) was administered to a sample of public and private elementary and secondary U.S. schools, principals, school districts, and teachers several times between 1987 and 2011. In addition to descriptive data, this survey collected information on perceptions of school climate and problems. The *National Teacher and Principal Survey* (NTPS) replaced this survey.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's *School-Associated Violent Death Study* has collected data on all school-associated violent deaths in the United States since 1992. Data are provided on homicides, suicides, or legal intervention in which the fatal injury occurred on a functioning elementary or secondary school campus; while the victim was on the way to or from regular sessions at school; or while attending or on the way to or from an official school event.

The *Youth Risk Behavior Survey* is part of the Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System, conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention since 1990. Surveys are collected from representative samples of 9th- through 12th-grade students on behaviors that contribute to causes of death, disability, and social problems.