

Recent Shootings at U.S. Schools

OCTOBER 1, 1997

A 16-year-old boy in Pearl, MS, shoots his mother, then goes to his high school and shoots nine students, two fatally. He is sentenced to life in prison.

DECEMBER 1, 1997

Three students are killed and five others wounded in a hallway at Heath High School in West Paducah, KY. A 14-year-old student is arrested.

MARCH 24, 1998

Four girls and a teacher are killed and 10 people wounded during a false fire alarm at the middle school in Jonesboro, AR. Two boys hiding in the woods open fire on the group.

APRIL 24, 1998

A science teacher is shot to death in front of students during an eighth-grade graduation dance in Edinboro, PA. A 14-year-old student is arrested.

MAY 19, 1998

Three days before graduation, an 18-year-old honor student allegedly opens fire in a parking lot at the high school in Fayetteville, TN, killing a classmate who was dating his ex-girlfriend.

MAY 21, 1998

Two teenagers are fatally shot and more than 20 people are injured when a 15-year-old allegedly opens fire at a high school in Springfield, OR. His parents are later found slain in their home.

APRIL 16, 1999

A high-school sophomore fires two shots in a school hallway in Notus, ID. No one is injured.

APRIL 20, 1999

Two teenage students ambush Columbine High School in Littleton, CO, killing 15 people, including 10 classmates and themselves.

Source: *The Associated Press*





TERRORISM & VIOLENCE IN OUR SCHOOLS

By DANIEL E. DELLA-GIUSTINA, SCOTT E. KERR and DAWN L. GEORGEVICH

Acts of terrorism and violence in U.S. schools have become more common in recent years. Researchers at West Virginia University developed a survey to determine whether schools located in three West Virginia counties have established plans and procedures to deal with acts of terrorism/violence. Recommendations are then offered, and the need for school-specific programs is emphasized.

Twelve years ago, when the book *Planning for School Emergencies* was published, terrorist acts were discussed, but little was said about planning and preparing for such incidents (Della-Giustina). Just over a decade later, terrorism and violence have become important issues to schools across the nation.

To assess whether schools in West Virginia have procedures in place to deal with acts of terrorism/violence, researchers at West Virginia University developed a 25-question survey; it was distributed to administrators, faculty and staff at six

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schools—three high schools and three junior high/middle schools located in three West Virginia counties. The survey was designed to document their knowledge of plans, procedures and responsibilities for preventing and responding to a violent event.

Eight of the 25 questions were used to assess school preparedness; the remaining 17 addressed how the various school districts developed and approved activities designed to prevent or reduce violence committed on school property. Responses were then analyzed to determine whether faculty, staff and adminis-

FIGURE 1
Number of Various Crimes Occurring in Public Schools: 1996-97

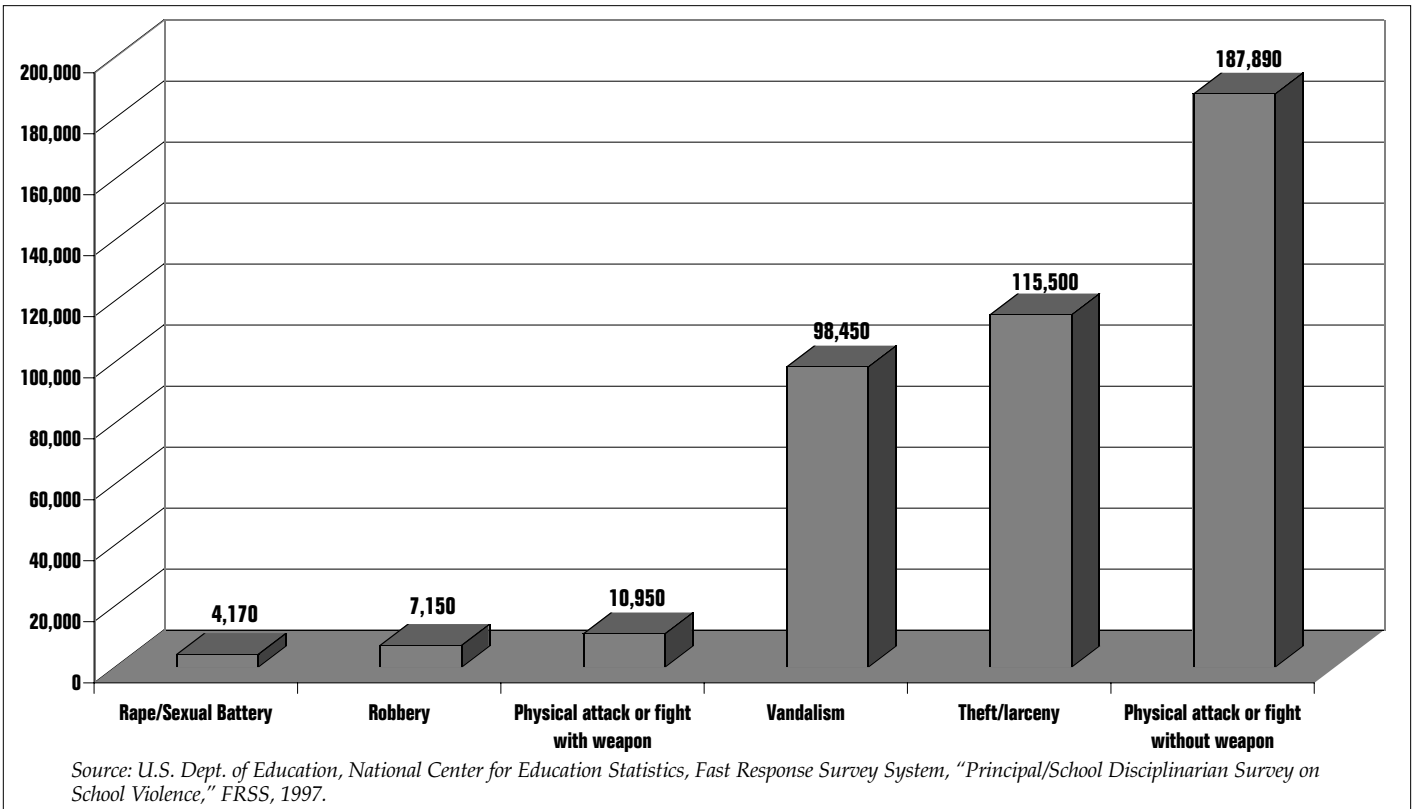
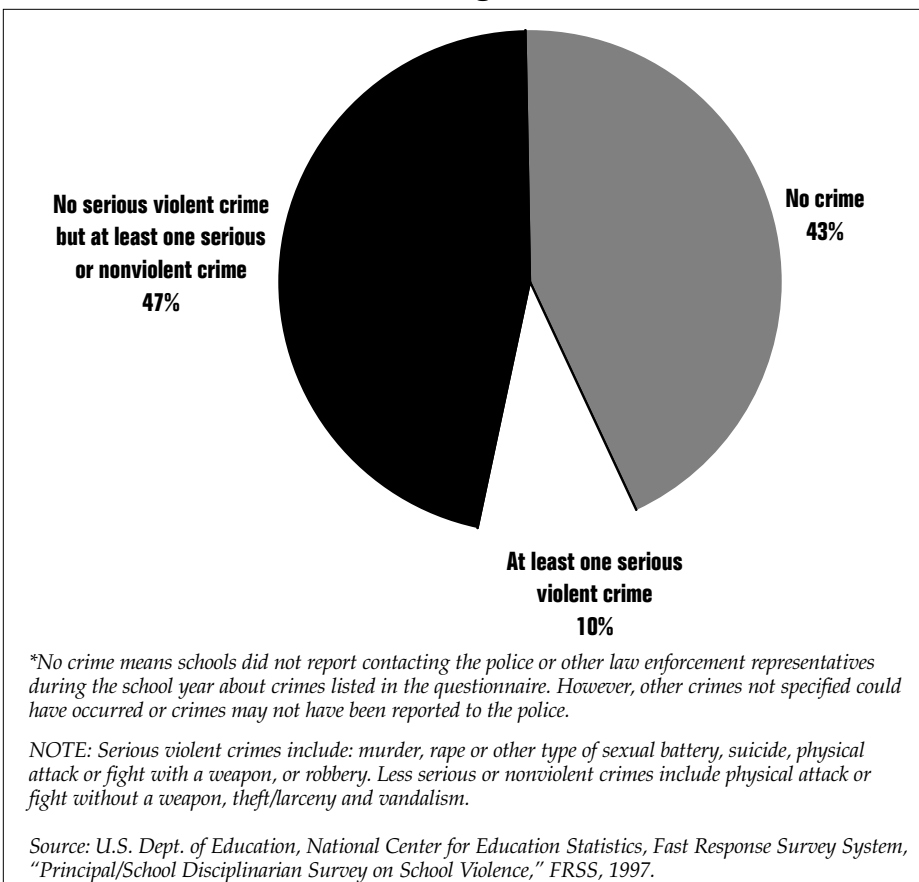


FIGURE 2
Percent of Public Schools Indicating the Seriousness of Reported Crimes Occurring at the School: 1996-97



trators possessed the knowledge and skills to successfully implement preparedness and response plans.

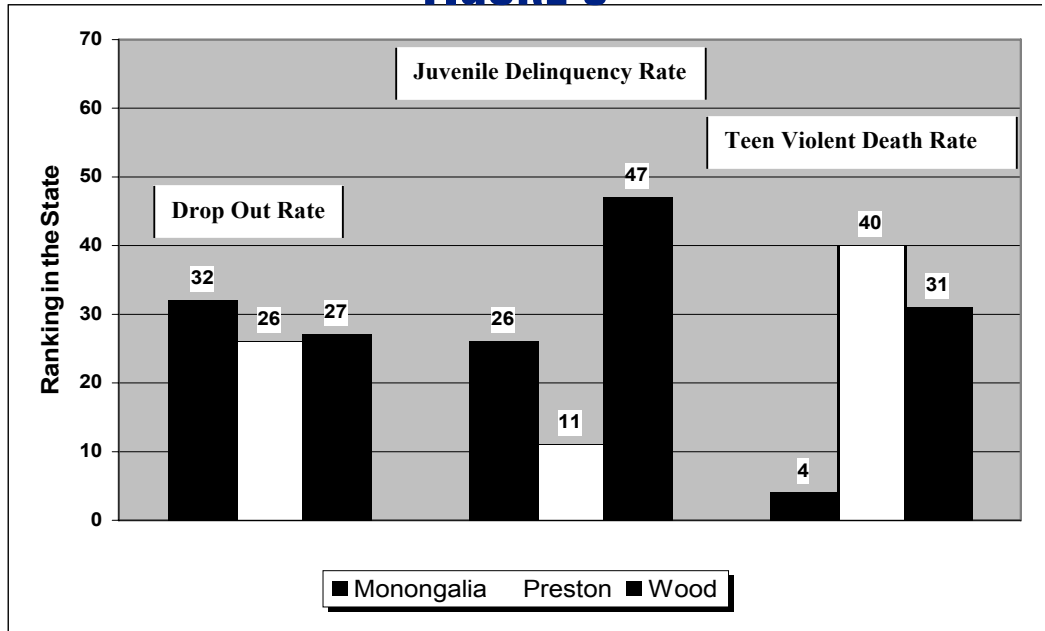
A literature review was performed to identify acts of terrorism/violence that have occurred in schools in the U.S.; this search revealed the limited amount of available information relevant to this study. In addition, representatives of the U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services and the U.S. Dept. of Justice were contacted. Many of the survey questions were developed based on input from these contacts, who also reviewed the questions prior to development of the survey instrument.

After reviewing survey results, the authors suggest strategies regarding protective measures that should be developed. Readers should note, however, that no single approach can be considered a panacea. Each school system must develop customized guidelines that can be incorporated into a comprehensive plan that best serves its distinctive needs.

RECENT EVENTS AT U.S. SCHOOLS

The April 1999 tragedy at Columbine High School in Littleton, CO, brought the issue of school violence to the forefront once again. In the last three years, several similar incidents have occurred in West Paducah, KY; Pearl, MS; Fayetteville, TN; and Springfield, OR.

In the wake of these events, schools are searching for ways to address out-

FIGURE 3

breaks of violence. Unfortunately, not only are the answers difficult to develop, they are not universally accepted nor effective. Clearly, these issues must be explored and communities better prepared to face acts of terrorism and violence in schools.

NATIONAL DATA

National data collected by the U.S. Dept. of Education show that 10 percent of the nation's schools experienced one or more serious or violent crimes during the 1996-97 school year (USDOE "Principal/School Disciplinarian Survey").

Figure 1 shows the number and type of various crimes that occurred in public schools during 1996-97. Figure 2 reflects the level of seriousness of reported crimes that occurred in these schools.

SURVEY BACKGROUND

The survey was conducted in three West Virginia counties—Monongalia, Preston and Wood. West Virginia Kids Count statistics rank each county based on the most-recent available data: 1=best; 55=worst. High-school dropout rate is based on the percentage of enrolled 12th-grade students who graduate; juvenile delinquency case rate is determined by the number of delinquency cases (including status offenses, misdemeanors and felonies) reported per 1,000 youths age 10 to 21; teen violent death rate is determined by the number of deaths due to homicide, suicide and unintentional injury among teens age 15 to 19 per 100,000 teens. Figure 3 shows where the three counties included in this study rank with respect to these rates.

Figure 4 lists the eight yes/no questions designed to profile the preparedness of the six participating schools. Figures 5 and 6 identify the percentage of "yes" responses from those surveyed. These results suggest that the schools had a written plan to address different types of emergencies, but not specifically to handle acts of terrorism or violence. Furthermore, these data suggest that the teachers surveyed are not trained to observe students and identify warning signs of violent behavior. Data also suggest that the participating schools do not conduct drills or exercises to prepare and respond to terrorist acts, nor do the middle/junior high schools have coded alarms to warn of in-school emer-

gencies. Figure 7 contains several respondent comments that support these conclusions.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the results of this sample survey, the researchers have inferred the problems facing the nation's schools. These recommendations are not the only answers; they reflect the authors' judgment about some potential improvements. These measures may not work for all schools. Therefore, each school must evaluate its needs to develop effective plans.

Develop a Student Organization

Operating under a name such as Students Opposed to School Violence (SOS-V), this group would be a student-run organization supported by a faculty advisor/mentor. This group's objective would be to develop knowledge about violence and terrorism in schools and various preventive methods, including information on warning signs of violent behavior. The SOS-V would serve as a monitoring group, reporting potential problems to administrators for resolution.

Create a Standardized Complaint Form

A standardized complaint form can be developed to encourage students to submit sensitive information *anonymously* regarding potential threats to school safety.

FIGURE 4

Survey Questions

- 1 Does your school emergency response plan include provisions for acts of terrorism?
- 2 Are all administrators trained in emergency procedures and what to do in the event of a terrorist act?
- 3 Are students informed of their role in the event of an emergency situation?
- 4 Are all staff members informed of their role in an emergency situation?
- 5 Are teachers trained to observe students for signs of a terrorist act?
- 6 Does your school conduct drills or exercises to prepare for terrorist-related acts?
- 7 Does your school have coded alarms to warn of emergencies?
- 8 Does your school intend to implement a plan that deals with terrorism?

However, such an approach must be implemented and monitored carefully to prevent any abuses.

Work With Local Authorities

Schools should submit current scale diagrams of their facilities to local first-responder authorities (e.g., police, fire departments); this helps these groups become familiar with the school's layout—crucial knowledge in an emergency. The diagrams should indicate entry and egress points and traffic use

FIGURE 5

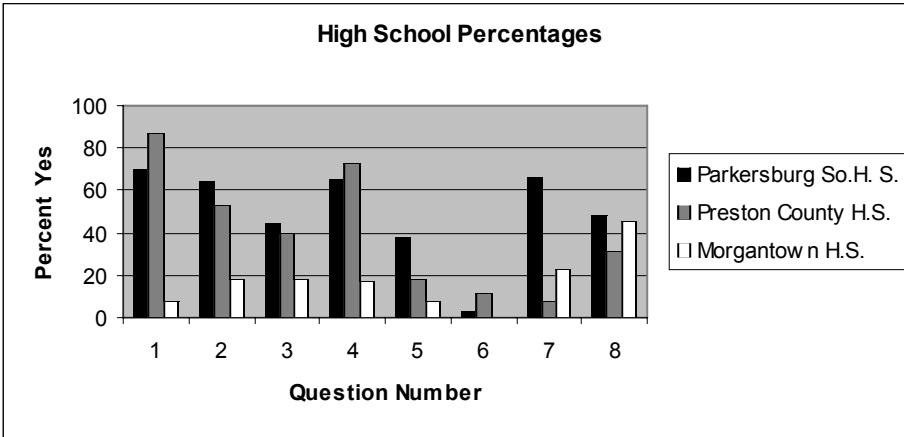


FIGURE 6

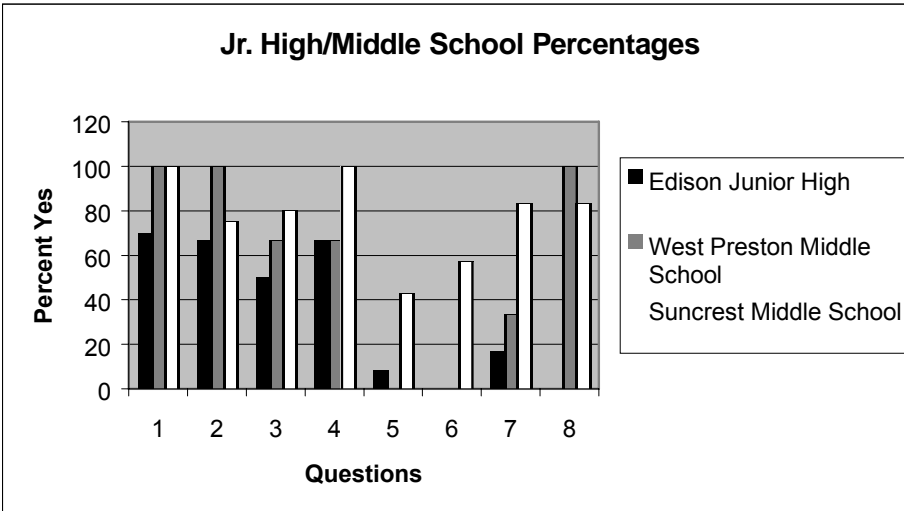


FIGURE 7

Each school system must develop customized guidelines that can be incorporated into a comprehensive plan that best serves its distinctive needs.

Survey Responses

“We are in the dark as to what to do in the event of a terrorist act.”

“This school is wide open to acts of terrorism. We have an open campus where almost every room can be accessed for periods of time during the day. If it were the intention of any person to cause harm or damage to persons or property, s/he would have a clear advantage.”

“We have a procedure to follow in the case of a bomb threat, but to my knowledge, that is all.”

“All personnel need to be advised and trained on emergencies.”

“I don’t think our school has anything on terrorism.”

“School counselors should do more intervention and less scheduling and other program paperwork.”

patterns, as well as locations where students and faculty may be trapped and the location of hazardous materials that might amplify a crisis. Drills should be conducted annually to prepare all involved to respond to a violent event.

Hold Bi-Annual Assemblies

Twice a year, teachers, staff and students should meet to discuss conflict resolution and ways to identify threats and other violent behavior. Such meetings are an effective way to give students much-needed information on conflict resolution and how to identify violent behavior. Figure 8 lists several warning signs of violence in children.

Take Steps to Improve Security

Magnetic metal detectors are being used more widely in schools. As one author states, “The debate America had . . . over whether metal detectors are effective is virtually irrelevant: expect them in a school near you, starting this September” (Cloud 34+). According to advocates, they deter students from bringing metallic weapons (knives, guns) and metal bomb components into schools. However, since some weapons do not contain metal, metal detectors are only part of the answer.

A closed campus with one main entrance is another effective strategy; this approach works even if the school has several separate buildings, provided they are closely grouped. A guard can be stationed and a metal detector installed at the entrance. This strategy may require that an impenetrable fence be constructed around the entire complex.

Visitors and service vendors should be required to sign in and show photo identification. Guards can be stationed near other exits to direct visitors to the main entrance, especially if the school does not have a closed campus. These exits should be restricted to emergency use.

In addition, surveillance cameras can be placed throughout the school to monitor entrances, exits and hallways. Cameras should operate continuously, and resulting videotapes should be analyzed, then archived.

Key distribution must be controlled as well. Non-duplicable keys should be used and distributed only to a small group of responsible adult employees. Each individual must be accountable for the keys received.

FIGURE 8

Warning Signs of Violence

WARNING SIGNS IN THE SCHOOL-AGED CHILD:

- Has trouble paying attention and concentrating.
- Often disrupts classroom activities.
- Does poorly in school.
- Frequently gets into fights with other children in school.
- Reacts to disappointments, criticism or teasing with extreme and intense anger, blame or revenge.
- Watches many violent television shows and movies or plays a lot of violent video games.
- Has few friends, and is often rejected by other children because of his/her behavior.
- Makes friends with other children known to be unruly or aggressive.
- Consistently does not listen to adults.
- Is not sensitive to the feelings of others.
- Is cruel or violent toward pets or other animals.
- Is easily frustrated.

WARNING SIGNS IN THE PRETEEN OR TEENAGE ADOLESCENT:

- Consistently does not listen to authority figures.
- Pays no attention to the feelings or rights of others.
- Mistreats people and seems to rely on physical violence or threats of violence to solve problems.
- Often expresses the feeling that life has treated him/her unfairly.
- Does poorly in school and often skips class.
- Misses school frequently for no identifiable reason.
- Gets suspended from or drops out of school.
- Joins a gang, gets involved in fighting, or steals or destroys property.
- Drinks alcohol and/or uses inhalants or drugs.

Source: Excerpted from a brochure published through a collaborative project of the American Psychological Assn. and American Academy of Pediatrics. Full-text copies are available by contacting the American Academy of Pediatrics, Div. of Publications, 141 Northwest Point Blvd., P.O. Box 927, Elk Grove Village, IL 60009-0927.

SUMMARY ELEMENTS

- Identify basic warning signs of potential violence. This can intercept problems before they escalate into disruptive events.
- Define strategies and initiatives for dealing with anticipated problems. This includes staying current on national school terrorism issues and planning, as well as evaluating these plans for effectiveness as they are implemented.
- Develop strategies designed to mitigate the impact of youth violence and terrorism that does occur. If problems can be curtailed at a younger age, future acts of violence may be prevented.

CONCLUSION

The schools that participated in this study lack effective policies, plans and procedures to respond to acts of terrorism/violence. A follow-up study is planned; it will involve schools in all 55 counties in West Virginia. Such a project could serve as a national model.

No universally applicable formula for prevention is available. Preventive measures that work in one school might not work in another. Therefore, individual schools must evaluate their needs to determine what will work best. ■

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