VIRGINIA YOUTH VIOLENCE PROJECT
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Congressional Briefing on Understanding and Preventing Youth Violence
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School Violence Fear Versus Facts

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Recent school shootings have once again drawn attention to the tragic problem of youth violence and particularly the question of school safety. In my brief remarks today I want to emphasize three central points:

1. 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.

2. Schools are being plagued by a wave of student threats, and schools do need threat assessment policies and procedures. Currently, there is a risk of over-reacting to the numerous insignificant threats that many students make, and at the same time overlooking the small number of serious threats.

3. Bullying is a pervasive problem in our schools, and it has been too long neglected by educators, parents, and students. Bullying is a critical factor in many of the school shootings, but more importantly it is a problem in its own right and deserving of more attention.

In response to these issues, Congress should:

1. Support scientifically rigorous investigation of student threats and support the development and field-testing of threat assessment guidelines and policies along the lines of the FBI's threat assessment report.

2. Pass legislation specifically guaranteeing students the right to be free from bullying and harassment in public schools.

3. Provide schools with resources for school counselors and school psychologists to work with aggressive students and victims of bullying.

Media coverage

The extensive and protracted coverage of the Columbine shooting frightened

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parents and educators across the country. Too much emphasis was placed on highly emotional images of traumatized children and anguished parents. If one picture is worth a thousand words, unfortunately, one fear-arousing photograph seems to outweigh a thousand facts. Fear clouds an objective, rational analysis of the problem. Now the highly arousing coverage of the most recent shootings threaten again to generate more distorted perceptions that schools are not safe and that every angry teenager is a potential killer. Consider these facts (see attached figures):

> Homicides at school, although tragic, represent only a tiny fraction of the fatalies suffered by youth people every year. The coverage given to school shootings is far out of proportion to the danger they actually pose to our children. Children are more likely to be killed at home or on the streets than at school. For example, in the 97-98 school year 35 children were murdered at school, but 2,717 children were murdered outside of school (Kaufman et al., 2000; National School Safety Center, 2001).
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> More children die of the flu and pneumonia than are killed at school (National Vital Statistics Report, 1998). Yet because of the school shootings, some schools now have children walk through metal detectors at the entrance. Perhaps it would save more lives to have a school nurse stand at the door to check students for signs of communicable disease.
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> And every day in the United States there are dozens of kids killed in car accidents (National Vital Statistics Report, 1998). We could save more children's lives by making sure they wear their seatbelts and by enforcing laws against drunk driving. Yet we are so accustomed to these deaths they don't make the national news and we tend to regard them as unavoidable.
>
> The school shootings also generate the erroneous perception that youth violence is on the increase, when in fact it is steadily declining. According to FBI arrest statistics, juvenile violent crime peaked in the early 90's and has declined dramatically in recent years (FBI, 1985-1999). Dr. Fox, who is the leading authority on this topic, can give you much more information.
>
> Let me just say that there is a similar pattern in schools. According to studies by the U.S. Dept of Education (Kaufman et al., 2000), violent crime in schools is down. Even school shootings, few as they are, are down from the early 90's when they received little attention (National School Safety Center, 2001).

Threats

One obvious consequence of the school shootings has been the upsurge in student threats. There are no official statistics on threats, but it is evident that across

the country, schools have had to deal with threats ranging from bomb threats to hit lists, from angry remarks to detailed plots. Schools have also become more sensitive to threats, and in some cases students have been suspended, expelled, or even prosecuted for making statements that in past years would have gone unnoticed or received little more than a reprimand. The culture has changed, and our students and our schools must adjust.

Students need education about the consequences of making a threat. At the same time, we must encourage them to come forward when serious threats are made. Educators must help students distinguish between seeking help for a friend who is talking about a violent action and narcing on someone to get him in trouble.

When threats are brought to the school's attention, educators need help distinguishing between potentially lethal threats that demand police investigation and threats that do not pose a serious risk of harm to others, but perhaps merit discipline and counseling. The FBI's report on school shootings describes this problem in detail and offers some excellent recommendations for schools (NCAVC, 2000). You will hear more about this from the FBI's Mary Ellen O'Toole. What we are lacking is government support for efforts to field test and refine the FBI's guidelines, as well as funds to train school mental health professionals to conduct threat assessments.

Bullying

Bullying is present in every school in America, yet because it is so pervasive, it is often overlooked or regarded as a normal experience. The National Household Education Survey found that 6% of high school students and 12% of middle school students are bullied on a regular basis. Our study of middle school bullying in Virginia (Brockenbrough, 2000) found that 10% of boys and 5% of girls report being bullied several times per week. With approximately 50 million school age children in the United States, literally millions of American children are affected by bullying.

Ask yourselves, when was the last time someone shoved you up against the wall at work? Punched you in the stomach or called you an obscene name? How would you feel if two or three of your coworkers trapped you in the rest room and spit on you? Why do we file million dollar lawsuits for sexual harassment in the workplace, yet shrug off the daily harassment of 13 year old girls? Why aren't children afforded the same dignity and legal protections that all of us take for granted?

We now know that bullying is not a trivial matter. Many of the school shooters were victims of bullying who decided to strike back. But most victims suffer in silence. In my children's school district the local police held SWAT team training at a local high school. With over 100,000 schools in the United States, the probability of this school needing a SWAT team is remote. But a few weeks later a teenage boy who was the

victim of chronic bullying went to his school at night and set himself on fire in front of the security camera. Our priorities are misplaced and we are focusing on the wrong aspects of the problem. Very few school divisions will ever have to deal with a school shooting, but most schools have to deal with teenage suicide, and every school has bullies. We are so preoccupied with the high profile tragedy on television that we overlook the commonplace tragedies in our own communities.

Studies have found that victims of chronic bullying are more likely than other students to suffer long-term problems with depression and anxiety, and to be academic underachievers. Studies of bullies find that by age 24 they are six times more likely to commit violent crimes than their peers (Olweus, 1993; Olweus & Limber, 1999; National School Safety Center, 1999; Nolin, Davies, & Chandler, 1996; Smith & Brain, 2000).

Unfortunately, studies also show that teachers tend to overlook bullying, either because they do not know what to do or because they think students should solve the problem by themselves (Olweus & Limber, 1999; O'Moore, 2000; Smith & Brain, 2000). Instead, they send the message that bullying will be overlooked and that bigger kids are permitted to pick on smaller kids. It's no wonder that students often fail to tell teachers or parents about being bullied, since they believe nothing will be done about it, or that it will only make matters worse because the bully will want revenge.

Our schools need firm policies against bullying, and training for teachers to recognize the problem of bullying. Studies show that formal, schoolwide bullyproofing programs can reduce bullying by 50% (Olweus & Limber, 1999; Stoker & Bonds, 2000). But most schools have neither the personnel nor the funding to implement such programs properly. Schools are severely understaffed with guidance counselors and school psychologists because they need every available dollar to hire teachers and reduce class size. Let's give schools the resources they need to implement these programs, as well as counselors who can work with bullies and treat victims before their problems become even more serious. And to make sure this happens, let's afford students the same rights in public schools that adults have in the workplace.

Conclusion

In closing, the problem of violence in schools is complex, and we cannot let the frightening images of recent tragedies, no matter how compelling, determine our policies. The facts are that schools are safe places, and they are safer today than they were 5 years ago, before school shootings gripped the nation. Schools do need policies and procedures for dealing with students who make threats of violence, and they need strong support for responding to the problem of bullying. Congress can help make this happen.

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School Violence Fears vs Facts

1. Media coverage of high profile cases generates fear and misconceptions. Schools are safe, youth violence is declining.
2. Schools need policies and procedures to deal with student threats.
3. Bullying is a pervasive, long neglected problem.

- Students should have legal protection from bullying.
- Schools need resources to prevent bullying.

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Student threats: What can be done?

- Student threats are common, but usually not dangerous. Schools must avoid over-reacting to threats.
- Schools need training and resources to identify serious threats of violence.
- FBI guidelines should be field-tested.
- Students need education about threats. Seeking help is not narcing.

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Bullying in schools: What can be done?

- Teachers often overlook bullying, parents fail to recognize it, and students are afraid to report it.
- Bullyproofing programs can reduce bullying 50%.
- Schools need firm discipline policies on bullying.
- Bullies and victims need mental health services.
- Students should have legal protections from bullying.

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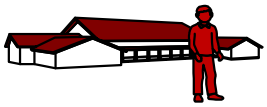
FBI Threat Assessment Report

Not profiling, but threat assessment....

"Although the risk of an actual shooting incident in any one school is very low, threats of violence are potentially a problem in any school. Once a threat is made, having a fair, rational, and standardized method of evaluating and responding to threats is critically important." FBI Report



Bullying in schools: A pervasive problem often overlooked

- Bullying can be physical, verbal, or relational.
- Bullying is pervasive: 6% of high school and 12% of middle school students. (NHES survey)
- Victims suffer higher rates of anxiety & depression, low achievement, school absence.
- Bullies have high rates of discipline problems, higher rate of criminal behavior as adults.

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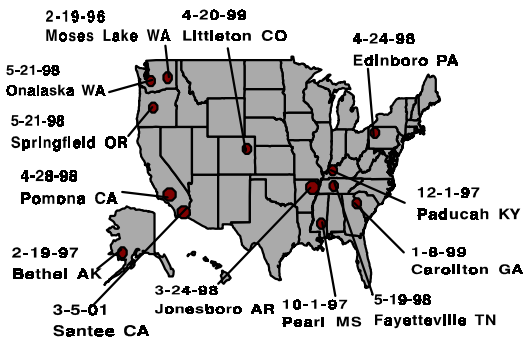
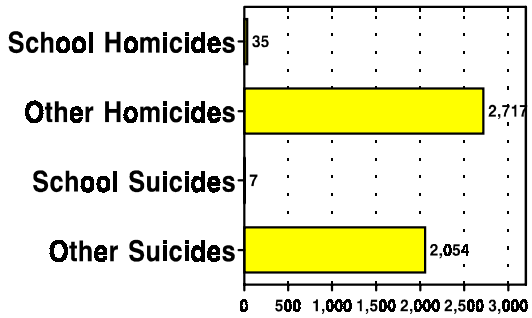
Multiple Homicides at School



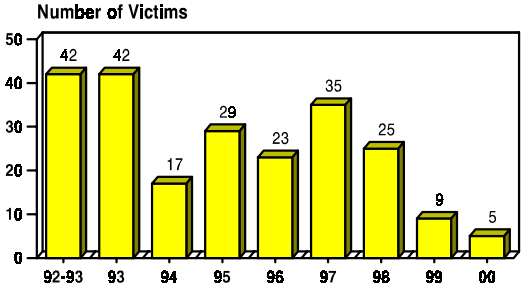
Selected incidents

Child Homicides & Suicides Rare at School



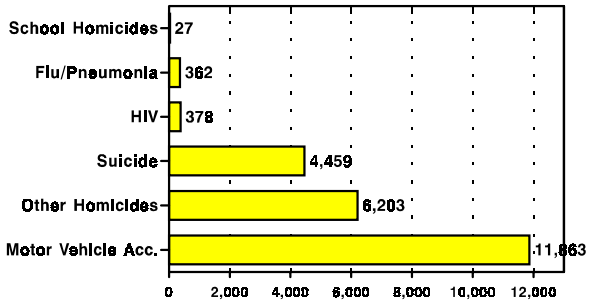
Victim ages 5-19, July 97 to June 98
National Center for Education Statistics, 2000

Homicides in U.S. Schools: 1992-93 to 2000-01



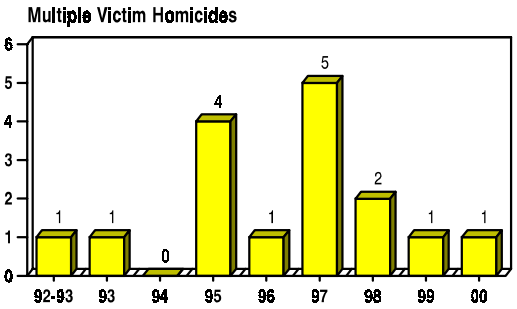
Source: National School Safety Center
Includes adult and student perpetrators
2000-2001 school year incomplete

Causes of Death in Young Persons Ages 5 to 24



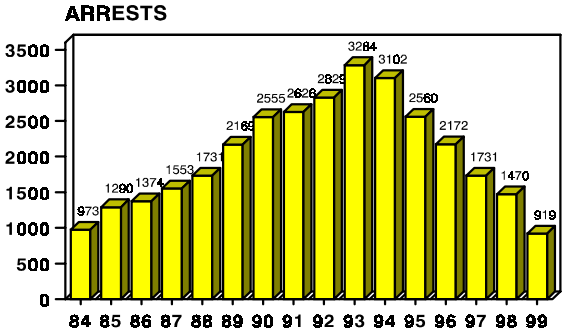
1997 Estimates from National Vital Statistics Report, 1998
and National School Safety Center

Multiple Homicides in U.S. Schools 1992-93 to 2000-01



Source: National School Safety Center
Multiple victim homicides by students
2000-2001 school year data incomplete

JUVENILE ARRESTS FOR HOMICIDE: 1984 TO 1999



FBI UNIFORM CRIME REPORTS