Frequency of School Violence

In the last several years, violent crimes at school have declined, and fewer students are carrying weapons to school or getting into fights. A 2001 national survey of high school students reported:

- 6% of students (and 10% of male students) said they had carried a weapon to school in the last month - a decrease of 45% since 1993;¹
- Almost 13% said that they had been involved in a physical fight on school property in the past year - a decrease of 23% since 1993;¹ and

However, students tell us that bullying continues to be a serious problem, particularly in middle schools. In 2001, about 14 percent of 6th graders reported being bullied, compared with about 9 percent of 9th graders and about 2 percent of 12th graders.² The 2001 survey also found:

- 9% of students said they had been threatened or injured with a weapon on school property in the past year;
- Almost 7% said they had missed at least one day of school in the last month because they felt unsafe at school or when traveling to or from school - an increase of 50% from 1993.³,⁴

In terms of risk for homicide, schools are about the safest place for teens - safer than their homes or their neighborhoods - and violent deaths at schools or school events are extremely rare. In the 1998-99 school year, less than 1% of the violent deaths of children and youth in the United States were school-related. A total of 33 children and teens were murdered on school property, at a school event, or on their way to and from school.³

School-associated homicides involving a single victim have actually decreased significantly since the 1994-95 school year, but an increase in the rate of multiple-victim homicides has lead to a small but significant rise in the overall number of deaths. Homicides at school continue to be extremely rare, however.⁶

Elements of Effective School Violence Prevention Plans

Because school violence reflects the violence in our communities and neighborhoods, schools are most effective in confronting school violence when the community around them provides support. Many communities have been able to reduce school violence by developing comprehensive, integrated plans involving schools, social services, mental health providers, and law enforcement and juvenile justice authorities.

In order to assist schools in developing and carrying out violence prevention and response plans, the Departments of Education and Justice and the American Institutes for Research developed a report, Safeguarding Our Children: An Action Guide (2000). The report indicates that an effective school violence prevention plan must include three tiers:

- Schools must build a school-wide foundation for all children. This involves: supporting positive discipline, academic success, and mental and emotional wellness through a caring school environment; teaching students appropriate behaviors and problem solving skills; positive behavioral support; and appropriate academic instruction with engaging curricula and effective teaching practices.
- Schools must identify students at risk for severe academic or behavioral difficulties early on and create services and supports that address risk factors and build protective factors for them. It is important that staff be trained to recognize early warning signs and make appropriate referrals. Once students are identified, they must receive coordinated services that meet their individual needs. A number of approaches have been developed for interventions at this stage, including anger management training, structured after-school
programs, mentoring, group and family counseling, changing instructional practices, and tutoring.

- Schools must identify and provide intensive interventions for the few children who are experiencing significant emotional and behavioral problems. To be effective, these approaches generally require the collaboration of schools, social services, mental health providers, and law enforcement and juvenile justice authorities.

Responding to a Potentially Violent Student

If you are concerned about a student, because of threats or some other indication that he/she might become violent, you should immediately talk with the student or arrange for another member of the school staff to do so. Ideally, your school has a team and procedure in place to deal with threats of violence. If it is determined that the student is at risk and the student refuses to talk, is argumentative, responds defensively, or continues to express violent or dangerous thoughts or plans, arrangements should be made for an immediate evaluation by a mental health professional with experience evaluating children and adolescents. Evaluation of any serious threat must be done in the context of the individual student’s past behavior, personality, and current stressors. In an emergency situation or if the student or family refuses help, it may be necessary to contact the local police for assistance or take the child to the nearest emergency room for evaluation. Students who have made serious threats must be carefully supervised while awaiting professional intervention. Immediate evaluation and appropriate ongoing treatment of youngsters who make serious threats or appear to be at risk can help the troubled student and reduce the risk of tragedy.\(^1\)

For more information, see:

National Resource Center for Safe Schools

Prevent Gang Violence in School

In the bulletin *Combating Fear and Restoring Safety in Schools (1998)*, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention recommends the following approaches to dealing with gangs in schools:

- Establishing ongoing professional development and inservice training programs for all school employees, including training techniques in classroom management and in dealing with cultural diversity, disruptive students and parents, and campus intruders.
- Conducting leadership training classes to assist students in developing insight and skills that enable them to work harmoniously with diverse individuals and groups.
- Offering classes incorporating curriculums on life skills and resistance to peer pressure, values clarification, and cultural sensitivity.
- Implementing dress codes designed to eliminate gang colors and clothing, publicizing the codes at school, and distributing them to all students and parents.
- Adopting school uniforms—particularly for elementary and middle school students—sometimes optional and sometimes mandated. Financial assistance should be available to parents who cannot afford uniforms.
- Reducing the length of time between classes to discourage loitering.
- Establishing partnership academies, schools-within-schools, alternative schools, beacon schools, in-school suspension programs, and school-to-work programs in collaboration with colleges and businesses in order to relocate and continue educating students with histories of classroom disruption, lack of motivation, and gang membership.
- Implementing victim/offender programs requiring juvenile offenders to make restitution to victims for damage or loss incurred or to perform community service.
- Creating a climate of ownership and school pride by including students, parents, teachers, and community leaders in the safe-school planning process.
- Staging regular campus-wide graffiti and vandalism cleanup campaigns and cleanup rallies in response to specific incidents of defacement and destruction.
- Organizing crisis intervention teams to counsel students coping with troubling violence in and near school.
- Offering students, especially juvenile gang members, special outreach and after school programs as an alternative to gang membership.

For more information, see:

Youth Gang Programs and Strategies (2000) - Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, U.S. Department of Justice

Youth Gangs and Violence

Although once thought to be an inner-city problem, gang violence has spread to communities throughout the United States. At last count, there were more than 24,500 different youth gangs around the country, and more than 772,500 teens and young adults were members of gangs.\(^1\)

Teens join gangs for a variety of reasons. Some are seeking excitement; others are looking for prestige, protection, a chance to make money, or a sense of belonging.\(^2\) Few teens are forced to join gangs; in most cases, teens can refuse to join without fear of retaliation.\(^3\)

Membership on the Rise
There has been a dramatic increase in gang activity in the United States since the 1970's. In the 1970's, gangs were active in less than half the states, but now every state reports youth gang activity.\(^4\) And, while many people think of gangs as just an inner-city problem, that is clearly no longer the case. In the past few decades we have seen a dramatic increase in the growth of gang problems in smaller cities, towns, and rural areas.\(^5\)

Since 1996, the overall number of gangs and gang members in the United States has decreased. However, in cities with a population over 25,000, gang involvement still remains near peak levels.\(^6\)

Age of Members
Most youth gang members are between the ages of 12 and 24, and the average age is about 17 to 18 years. Around half of youth gang members are 18 or older, and they are much more likely to be involved in serious and violent crimes than younger gang members. Only about 1-in-4 youth gang members are ages 15 to 17.\(^2\)

For most teens, gang membership is a brief phase. Three studies that tracked teens over time found that one-half to two-thirds of youth gang members leave the gang by the one-year mark.\(^8\),\(^9\),\(^10\)

Girls in Gangs
Male youth are much more likely to join gangs than female youth. It is hard to get a good estimate of the number of female gangs and gang members, however, because many police jurisdictions do not count girls as gang members. While the national estimates based on police reports indicate that only about 8% of gang members are female,\(^11\) one 11-city survey of eighth-graders found that 38% of gang members are female.\(^12\) Female gangs are somewhat more likely to be found in small cities and rural areas than in large cities, and female gang members tend to be younger, on average, than male gang members.\(^13\)

Female gang members are involved in less delinquent or criminal activity than male gang members, and they commit fewer violent crimes.\(^14\) However, female gang members are still an important concern. In one survey, 78% of female gang members reported being involved in gang fights, 65% reported carrying a weapon for protection, and 39% reported attacking someone with a weapon.\(^15\)
Not Just an Inner-City Problem
Although many people think of gangs as a problem confined to the inner-city neighborhoods, that is clearly no longer the case. In the past few decades there has been a dramatic increase in the growth of gang problems in smaller cities, towns, and villages.[16] When surveyed in 1999, 66 percent of large cities, 47 percent of suburban counties, 27 percent of small cities, and 18 percent of rural counties reported active youth gangs.[17]

Gangs in suburban, small town, and rural areas are different than gangs in large cities. They include more females, white, and younger youth, and are more likely to have ethnically and racially mixed memberships.[18]

Gangs at School
Youth gangs are linked with serious crime problems in elementary and secondary schools in the United States. Students report much higher drug availability when gangs are active at their school. Schools with gangs have nearly double the likelihood of violent victimization at school than those without a gang presence.[19] Teens that are gang members are much more likely than other teens to commit serious and violent crimes. For example, a survey in Denver found that while only 14% of teens were gang members, they were responsible for committing 89% of the serious violent crimes.[20]

Physical Fighting Facts and Statistics
(Printable Version)
Physical fighting among adolescents is of public health concern both because of the potential for fight-related injuries and its association with participation in many other health risk behaviors. Fights that involve weapons are a major cause of serious injuries and deaths among youth.[21]

Prevalence
A 2001 national survey of high school students found that in the past year:

- 33% of the students had been in a physical fight;
- 12.5% of the students had been in a physical fight on school property; and
- 4% of the students had been hurt badly enough in a fight to need medical treatment.

Significant gender differences were found: 43% of male students reported fighting in the past year, while only 24% of female students reported involvement in a physical fight.

The percentage of students who reported being involved in fights decreased with age from 39.5 percent among ninth grade students down to 26.5 percent among twelfth grade students.[22] It is unclear, however, whether this reduction reflects the effects of increasing maturity, a change in the propensity to report having been in a fight, or a tendency for violence-prone youth to drop out of school, leaving a less violent pool of students in the higher grades.

There has actually been a significant decline in physical fighting in the last decade. Between 1991 and 2001, physical fighting among high school students decreased by almost 22%. In 1991, 42.5% of students reported involvement in a fight in the past 12 months, while in 2001, 33.2% of students reported fighting.

An Indicator of High-Risk Behavior
Fighting can also be an important warning sign, because youth that are involved in physical fights often engage in other high-risk behaviors. Such behaviors include using illegal drugs, binge drinking, and having unsafe sex.[2] [3] [4] [5]

One national survey found that of the youth who reported fighting in the past month:
● 45% had unsafe sex in the last 3 months,
● 41% had two or more sex partners in the last 3 months,
● 39% had driven a car while drunk or high in the last month,
● 24% had attempted suicide during the past 12 months, and
● 3% had used cocaine in the last month. [6]

**Substance Abuse and Fighting**
Adolescents who use alcohol and illicit drugs such as marijuana, cocaine, and anabolic steroids are much more likely to be involved in physical fights. [7] In addition, fight participants who are intoxicated are much more likely to use weapons and cause serious injuries. One study found that when the participants were intoxicated, 61% sustained serious injuries and 51% used weapons. In contrast, when alcohol and drugs were not involved, only 18% of the fights involved serious injuries or weapon use. [8]

**Fighting and Weapon Carrying**
Youth who carry weapons are more likely to be involved in physical fights. One study found that students who had carried weapons were more than twice as likely to get in fights. [9], [10]

**Impact of Conflict Resolution and Peer Mediation Programs**
At this time, the effectiveness of most conflict resolution programs in reducing physical violence has not been adequately assessed. When studies have been conducted, some programs have shown no impact on aggressive behavior, while a few have been shown to reduce aggressiveness, violence, dropout rates, and student suspensions. A number of programs have been shown to be effective in improving academic performance and increasing cooperation, communication skills, assertiveness, self-esteem, and self-control. [16], [17]

Above information found at [www.safeyouth.org](http://www.safeyouth.org)