

The Civic Column

[[*Strengthening our community through education and awareness*]]



Report from the Mercyhurst College Civic Institute

Vol.2, Issue I

May 2010



Inside the Report

A Look at School Violence
Safe Schools Initiative
Key Findings 1- 5

The purpose of the Mercyhurst Civic Institute:

- Enhance and facilitate citizen participation in decision-making.
- Provide high-quality, objective information to assist local decision-making.
- Convene community forums that encourage reasoned reflection and free and open discussion of regional issues.
- Educate the Erie community and Commonwealth of Pennsylvania about various issues through Institute reports and publications.
- Foster human networks that enhance communication, link resources, strengthen community participation and build social capital.
- Promote research, learning, teaching and service opportunities for the Mercyhurst community.

Other research has identified risk and protective factors specific to the school that affect the likelihood of students engaging in violent behavior. Characteristics that lead to an increased risk are: overcrowding; poor design and use of space; lack of firm yet caring disciplinary procedures; student alienation; multicultural insensitivity; teacher and peer rejection of at-risk students; and students resentment toward school routines (Educational Resources Information Center, 2000). School violence is less likely to occur in schools with the following characteristics: positive school climate and atmosphere; clear and high expectations of all students; strong student bonding to the school; high levels of student participation and parent involvement; and opportunities to gain skills and develop socially.

Reading, Writing and Weapons: A Look at School Violence

In the 1990's, a number of cities became infamous as school shootings rocked their communities and shocked the nation. These acts of violence left parents, students, school officials and the public at large wondering how it happened, re-evaluating security measures and taking steps to prevent any future attacks. Numerous entities collaborated to discern the scope of school violence and to develop recommendations to maintain safe learning environments for children. With the ten-year anniversary of Columbine and even longer since the school

dance turned violent right here in Erie County, school violence (which can include a variety of behaviors ranging from bullying to school shootings, threats to physical fights, gang activity to assaults and may or may not involve the use of weapons) is no longer in the media's spotlight. Hopefully, there are no incidents that make the topic return to our television sets. But that doesn't mean that we can't ask what investigators learned about school violence and what the research shows about school violence in recent years.

The Safe Schools Initiative, a collaboration of the U. S. Secret Service and the U. S. Department of Justice (2002), was launched in response to the attack at Columbine High School. The focus was on targeted school shootings and attacks occurring between 1974 and June 2000 (37 incidents with 41 attackers). The following are highlights of the findings from the initiative:

- There is no accurate or useful profile of students who engaged in targeted school violence. There was considerable variance in demographics, family situations, school performance, social relationships and other areas.
- Seventy-one percent of attackers felt bullied, threatened, persecuted, or injured by others prior to the incident.
- A mental health diagnosis was not common among attackers, but most showed a history of suicidal thoughts or attempts or feelings of depression.
- The majority of attackers had some interest in violence, but the specific themes and mediums for expression varied.
- Most attackers had no history of prior violent or criminal behavior.
- Most attackers were known to have difficulty coping with loss and failure.
- Incidents of targeted violence at school are rarely sudden, impulsive acts but are rather planned out in advance.
- While most attackers did not make direct threats prior to the attack, their behaviors often indicated that a plan had been developed and often raised concerns among others.
- Other people (usually peers) often knew about the idea or plan and other students were often involved in some way; however, the information was rarely brought to an adult's attention.
- Most attackers had access to weapons and had used them prior to the attack. The weapons usually came from their own home or the home of a relative.
- The majority of attacks were stopped by someone other than law enforcement personnel.
- The time span between the attacker's decision to attack and the actual incident is typically short.

A Look at School Violence *continued*

This report utilizes local data and national data in order to explore information related to school violence, particularly the presence and use of weapons on school property as well as threats and attacks of a physical nature. Gang violence and bullying is not addressed.

The local information comes from the 2007 administration of the Pennsylvania Youth Survey (PAYS). The PAYS is a self-report measure administered every other year to 6th, 8th, 10th and 12th grade students in

and Baum, 2009). More information on their sources of information can be found in the Executive Summary section and Appendix A of their document. Indicators 4, 13, 14 and 17 were primarily used.

It should be noted that the ethnicity categories differed slightly between local and national reporting. For local data, the Asian subgroup also includes Pacific Islanders. For national data, the other/multiple subgroup only includes multiple responses and does not

are some limitations with the data itself that deserve mention. The local and national surveys were not administered at the same time and thus do not utilize the exact same time period for consideration. In other words, while asking about past 30-days or past 12-month behavior provides a set time frame that can be compared, there are variations to the time periods that may reflect different times of the year or other factors. Furthermore, the questions regarding past 30-day behavior are only a snapshot of a student's behavior; it is very possible that the student had brought a weapon to school 60 days ago but not within the past 30 days, which would not be reflected in the data. For those students that do report bringing a weapon onto school property, there is no way to know why they do so. Brown (2004) argues that the reason for carrying a weapon, such as rather it is for offensive or defensive purposes, may be important.

Less specific to school shootings, risk factors have been identified for any type of violent behavior among adolescents (Center for Disease Control, 2008). Some examples include individual risk factors such as association with delinquent peers or involvement with gangs, low IQ or poor academic performance and high emotional distress; relationship risk factors such as low parental involvement, poor family functioning and poor supervision of children; and community risk factors such as diminished economic opportunities, high level of transiency and low levels of community participation.



Pennsylvania's public schools. The questions focus on attitudes and behaviors regarding alcohol, tobacco and other drug use as well as antisocial behaviors and other special topics. The survey also examines a number of risk and protective factors that increase or decrease the likelihood that an individual would engage in problem behaviors. The data can be utilized to gauge the prevalence of the various problem behaviors and to plan for prevention and treatment programs in the community.

The national information comes from the 2008 version (reporting on 2007 data) of *School Crime and Safety*, which is published annually by The National Center for Education Statistics in the U. S. Department of Education and the Bureau of Justice Statistics in the U. S. Department of Justice (Dinkes, Kemp

include other groups. Also, different grade levels were included in the national report than were surveyed in the local sample, with dash marks indicating unavailable data.

As shown by the research, it is important to remember that school violence is hard to predict, particularly the rarest forms of violence. The data points explored in this report cannot be assumed to predict the likelihood of school violence. Bringing a weapon onto school property does not mean that it will be used to harm another person, just as an attacker may never carry a weapon until the day of the attack. These data points, however, are the best measure of school violence available and the best existing information to find out about the school climate directly from the students. There



Key Findings

Data Point 1 : [*Students carrying a weapon on school property during previous 30 days*]

Rather than waiting for a specific threat of school violence, which is rare, it is recommended that school officials investigate behaviors such as bringing a gun to school (U.S. Secret Service and U. S. Department of Education, 2002). The following table (Table 1.1) illustrates local data for Data Point 1. The overwhelming majority, 97.3%, have not brought a weapon onto school property in the past 30 days. Most students that did carry a weapon on school property in the past 30 days had only done so one or two times; however, there were 22 students who reportedly had a weapon on school property over 40 times.

Table 1.1 — How many times in the past 30 days have you brought a weapon (such as a gun, knife, or club) to school?

TABLE 1.1		
	No.	%
Never	5369	97.3
1 to 2 times	84	1.5
3 to 5 times	16	0.3
6 to 9 times	11	0.2
10 to 19 times	7	0.1
20 to 29 times	4	0.1
30 to 39 times	6	0.1
40+ times	22	0.4

The data was combined to reflect those students who had brought a weapon onto school property in the past 30 days at least one time. The following table (Table 1.2) illustrates the breakdown by gender, race and grade level for both local and national data.

Table 1.2 — Percentage of students who reported carrying a weapon on school property at least one time during the previous 30 days

TABLE 1.2		
Gender	Local	National
Male	3.6	9.0
Female	1.8	2.7
Race/Ethnicity		
White	2.0	5.3
African American	4.8	6.0
Hispanic/Latino	1.0	7.3
American Indian	4.3	7.7
Asian	3.5	4.1
Other/Multiple	6.7	5.0
Grade		
6th	1.7	---
8th	2.1	---
9th	---	6.0
10th	3.5	5.8
11th	---	5.5
12th	4.3	6.0
Total	2.7	5.9

Of the 2.7% of students who reported bringing a weapon on school property at least one time in the past 30 days (n=150), the following table (Table 1.3) illustrates the characteristics of those students. In other words, 3.6% of males carried a weapon on school property in the past 30 days and 66.2% of the students who carried a weapon on school property in the past 30 days were male.

Table 1.3 — Characteristics of students who reported carrying a weapon on school property in the past 30 days

TABLE 1.3			
Gender	Local		
Male	66.2		
Female	33.8		
Race/Ethnicity			
White	54.7		
African American	16.2		
Hispanic/Latino	1.4		
American Indian	1.4		
Asian	1.4		
Other/Multiple	25		
Grade	Local	Grade	Local
6th	17.6	10th	29.7
8th	23.6	12th	29.1

KEY FINDINGS for Data Point 1:

OVERALL

- The percentage of students bringing a weapon onto school property in the past 30 days has been lower locally than nationally.
- The national percentage of students bringing a weapon onto school property in the past 30 days has declined from 11.8% of students in 1993 to 5.9% of students in 2007 (Dinkes, Kemp and Baum, 2009).

GENDER

- Nationally and locally, males are more likely than females to bring a weapon on school property.

ETHNICITY

- Nationally, the proportion of American Indian students who reported bringing a weapon on school property was greater than any other race. Hispanics/Latinos were more likely than African Americans, who were more likely than Whites.
- Locally, students reporting “other” or “multiple” races were more likely to bring a weapon on school property than students identifying one specific race category. African Americans were more likely than Whites, who were more likely than Hispanics/Latinos.
- White students accounted for the greatest percentage of students bringing a weapon on school property, which is at least partially reflective of the demographics of the area.

GRADE LEVEL

- Nationally, there are relatively no differences in the percentage of students carrying a weapon on school property by grade level.
- Locally, the proportion of students bringing weapons on school property increases with grade level.
- Of the students who reported bringing a weapon on school property, students in the two older grades (10th and 12th) accounted for slightly more of the responses than students in the two younger grades.

Key Findings

Data Point 2: [*How wrong it is to take handgun to school*]

In addition to asking about the frequency of bringing a weapon to school, the PAYS also asks the students how wrong they think it is to take a handgun to school. The following table (Table 2.1) illustrates local data for Data Point 2. While most students recognized at least on some level that it is wrong to take a handgun to school, 39 students felt it was not wrong at all. Analysis showed that a number of students who felt it was wrong to take a gun to school had reported having a weapon on school property in the past 30 days; one potential explanation is that some students feel it is okay to have another type of weapon other than a handgun on school property.

Table 2.1 —How wrong do you think it is for someone your age to take a handgun to school?

TABLE 2.1		
	No.	%
Very wrong	5051	91.6
Wrong	341	6.2
A little bit wrong	85	1.5
Not wrong at all	39	0.7

Table 2.2 —Percentage of students who reported that it was “not wrong at all” to take handgun to school

TABLE 2.2	
Total	0.7
Gender	
Male	1.0
Female	0.4
Race/Ethnicity	
White	0.4
African American	2.3
Hispanic/Latino	1.0
American Indian	0.0
Asian	1.7
Other/Multiple	1.6
Grade	
6th	0.7
8th	0.5
9th	---
10th	1.0
11th	---
12th	0.7

KEY FINDINGS for Data Point 2:

OVERALL

- The overwhelming majority of respondents felt that it was at least a little bit wrong to take a handgun to school.
- A number of students who felt it was wrong to bring a handgun to school reported having a weapon on school property in the past 30 days (may not be handgun).

GENDER

- A slightly higher percentage of males than females do not think it is wrong to take a handgun to school.

ETHNICITY

- A slightly higher percentage of African Americans do not think it is wrong to take a handgun to school compared to other ethnic groups.

GRADE LEVEL

- There were virtually no differences or distinguished patterns apparent for grade level.





Data Point 3: [*Students being threatened or being in a physical fight on school property in the past 12 months*]

Note: In the local survey, there were two questions: In the past 12 months, how often have you been threatened to be hit or beaten up on school property? In the past 12 months, how often have you been attacked and hit by someone, or beaten up, on school property? In the national data, the question was asked whether the student had been in a physical fight during the past 12 months; the survey did not ask about being threatened with a physical attack. The following tables (Table 3.1 and Table 3.2) illustrate local data for Data Point 3. Almost 27% of respondents have been threatened to be hit or beaten up in the past 12 months, while 11% actually have been attacked or beaten up.

Table 3.1 — In the past 12 months, how often have you been threatened to be hit or beaten up on school property?

TABLE 3.1		
	No.	%
Never	3796	73.1
Once	740	14.2
2 or 3 times	384	7.4
4 or 5 times	106	2
6 to 9 times	40	0.8
10 times or more	127	2.4

Table 3.2 — In the past 12 months, how often have you been attacked and hit by someone, or beaten up, on school property?

TABLE 3.2		
	No.	%
Never	4618	88.9
Once	354	6.8
2 or 3 times	120	2.3
4 or 5 times	36	0.7
6 to 9 times	17	0.3
10 times or more	47	0.9

The data was combined to reflect those students who had been threatened or been beaten up on school property at least one time in the past 30 days. The following table (Table 3.3) illustrates the breakdown by gender, race and grade level for both local and national data.

Table 3.3 — Percentage of students who reported being threatened or being in a physical fight on school property at least one time in the past 12 months

TABLE 3.3			
	Local Threatened Only	Local Hit/Beaten Up Only	National Physical Fight Only
Total	26.9	11.1	12.4
Gender			
Male	41.8	15.6	16.3
Female	21.9	6.7	8.5
Race/Ethnicity			
White	26.2	9.9	10.2
African American	24.8	11.8	17.6
Hispanic/Latino	26.5	11.1	15.5
American Indian	31.6	25.6	15.0
Asian	26.3	12.3	8.5
Other/Multiple	33.5	17.4	19.6
Grade			
6th	24.6	11.8	---
8th	31.2	12.5	---
9th	---	---	17
10th	29.9	10.8	11.7
11th	---	---	11
12th	18.9	7.4	8.6

KEY FINDINGS for Data Point 3:

OVERALL

- The percentage of students attacked and beaten up on school property in the past 12 months locally is slightly lower than the percentage of students who have been in a physical fight on school property in the past 12 months nationally.
- The national percentage of students in a physical fight on school property in the past 12 months has declined from 16.2% in 1993 to 12.4% in 2007 (Dinkes, Kemp and Baum, 2009).

GENDER

- Nationally and locally, a considerably higher percentage of males than females have been threatened or attacked on school property.
- Over 40% of males have been threatened to be hit or beat up on school property in the past 12 months.

ETHNICITY

- Nationally, students reporting multiple races were more likely to be in a physical fight on school property in the past 12 months than students identifying one specific race category. African Americans were the next highest ranked race in this category.
- Locally, a greater percentage of Native American students than any other race category reported being beaten up on school property in the past 12 months. There were not very large differences among races for being threatened to be beaten up.

GRADE LEVEL

- Nationally, a higher percentage of students in 9th grade reported being in a physical fight than students in later grades.
- Locally, a lower percentage of 12th graders reported being threatened to be beaten up or actually being beaten up on school property in the past 12 months than students in other grade levels.

Key Findings

Data Point 4: *Students being threatened or attacked with a weapon on school property in the past 12 months*

Note: The local survey asked about being threatened with a weapon and attacked with a weapon separately, while the national data reflects combined data.

While Data Point 1 sheds light on how often weapons are on school property, Data Point 4 indicates how often the weapons are being utilized in a threatening manner. The following tables (Table 4.1 and Table 4.2) illustrate local data for Data Point 4. While just over 94% of students reported not having been threatened with a weapon on school property in the past 12 months, 3.2% of students had been threatened one time and 2.3% of students had been threatened more than one time. Additionally, 1.5% of students reported being attacked by someone with a weapon on school property one time in the past 12 months, and 1.3% of students reported being attacked by someone with a weapon more than one time. Though the percentages are relatively small, there are 143 students who have reportedly been attacked by someone with a weapon on school property at least one time in the past 12 months.

Table 4.1 — In the past 12 months, how many times have you been threatened by someone with a weapon on school property?

	No.	%
Never	4897	94.4
Once	167	3.2
2 or 3 times	59	1.1
4 or 5 times	19	0.4
6 to 9 times	11	0.2
10 times or more	33	0.6

Table 4.2 — In the past 12 months, how many times have you been attacked by someone with a weapon on school property?

	No.	%
Never	5032	97.2
Once	76	1.5
2 or 3 times	21	0.4
4 or 5 times	14	0.3
6 to 9 times	9	0.2
10 times or more	23	0.4

The data was combined to reflect those students who had been threatened or attacked by someone with a weapon on school property at least one time in the past 30 days. The following table (Table 4.3) illustrates the breakdown by gender, race and grade level for both local and national data.

Table 4.3 — Percentage of students who reported being threatened or attacked with weapon on school property at least one time in the past 12 months

	Local Threatened Only	Local Hit/Beaten Up Only	National Physical Fight Only
Total	5.6	2.8	7.8
Gender			
Male	7.5	3.6	10.2
Female	3.8	1.9	5.4
Race/Ethnicity			
White	4.5	1.7	6.9
Hispanic American	7.7	5.6	9.7
Hispanic/Latino	7.1	3.0	8.7
American Indian	7.9	7.7	5.9
Asian	3.5	3.5	7.6
Other/Multiple	11.3	7.8	13.3
Grade			
6th	4.5	3.0	---
8th	5.3	2.5	---
9th	---	---	9.2
10th	7.0	2.7	8.4
11th	---	---	6.8
12th	5.1	2.7	6.3

KEY FINDINGS for Data Point 4:

OVERALL

- Though not directly comparable, the percentage of local students threatened or attacked by someone with a weapon on school property in the past 12 months seems to be similar or lower to national reports.
- The national percentage of students threatened or injured by someone with a weapon on school property in the past 12 months has fluctuated between 7.3% and 9.2% between 1993 and 2007 (Dinkes, Kemp and Baum, 2009).
- Locally, 143 students have been attacked by someone with a weapon on school property at least one time in the past 12 months.

GENDER

- Nationally and locally, a higher percentage of males than females have been threatened or injured by someone with a weapon on school property in the past 12 months.

ETHNICITY

- Nationally and locally, students reporting multiple races were more likely to be threatened or attacked by someone with a weapon on school property in the past 12 months than students identifying one specific race category.

GRADE LEVEL

- Nationally, a higher percentage of students in 9th grade and 10th grade reported being threatened or attacked by someone with a weapon on school property in the past 12 months than students in later grades.
- Locally, a higher percentage of tenth graders reported being threatened by someone with a weapon on school property in the past 12 months than students in other grade levels. There were very little grade level differences for students being attacked by someone with a weapon on school property in the past 12 months.

Key Findings

Data Point 5: [*Feeling safe at school*]

Keeping in mind that whether or not a child feels safe at school is impacted by many factors, the other data explored in this report (i.e. weapons on school property being threatened or attacked in a physical manner) will influence feelings of safety.

The following table (Table 5.1) illustrates local data for Data Point 5. Over 900 students (16.4%) reported feeling unsafe at school. This data could not be compared to national information because the question was asked in a slightly different manner.

Table 5.1 — *I feel safe at my school*

TABLE 5.1		
	No.	%
NO!	327	5.9
no	579	10.5
yes	2705	48.9
YES!	1920	34.7

Those students who answered NO! or no were combined together to reflect students who reported feelings unsafe. The following table (Table 5.2) illustrates the breakdown by gender, race and grade level for local data.

Table 5.2 — *Percentage of students who reported feeling unsafe at school at least one day during the previous 30 days*

TABLE 5.2	
	%
Total	16.4
Gender	
Male	17.2
Female	15.4
Race/Ethnicity	
White	13.4
African American	28.9
Hispanic/Latino	22.8
American Indian	34.0
Asian	10.3
Other/Multiple	23.8
Grade	
6th	11.5
8th	15.1
10th	21.4
12th	18.7

KEY FINDINGS for Data Point 5:

OVERALL

- Over 16% of students reported feeling unsafe at school.

GENDER

- A slightly greater percentage of males feel unsafe compared to females.

ETHNICITY

- Over one-third of American Indians and over one-fourth of African Americans feel unsafe at school.

GRADE LEVEL

- A greater percentage of 10th graders feel unsafe at school compared to other grades. This finding coincides with the pattern for students being threatened with a weapon on school property.

Research Gathering

An anonymous reporting system for students who know about potentially dangerous situations has also been recognized as important.





Mercyhurst College Civic Institute

School violence prevention efforts and programming is beyond the scope of this report, there are some resources available that school officials and others may find useful for obtaining more information. The publication entitled “Safeguarding Our Children: An Action Guide” provides detailed guidelines that include a three-level approach to preventing violence (building a school wide foundation, intervening early and providing intensive interventions). Other research has focused on the importance of reducing risk factors and increasing protective factors (Center for Disease Control, 2008). An anonymous reporting system for students who know about potentially dangerous situations has also been recognized as important (Brank et al., 2007).

ONLINE RESOURCES

- Dwyer, K., & Osher, D. 2000. Safeguarding Our Children: An Action Guide. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, U. S. Department of Justice and American Institutes for Research. Available at http://www.ed.gov/admins/lead/safety/actguide/action_guide.pdf
- Fein, R. et al. (2002). Threat Assessment in Schools: A Guide to Managing Threatening Situations and to Creating Safe School Climates. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education and U.S. Secret Service. Available at http://www.secretservice.gov/ntac/ssi_guide.pdf
- Sprague, J. (2007). Creating Schoolwide Prevention and Intervention Strategies: Effective Strategies for Creating Safer Schools and Communities. Available at <http://gwired.gwu.edu/hamfish>
- U. S. Department of Justice. (2001). School Violence: An Overview. Juvenile Justice , 8 (1). Available at <http://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/ojdp/188158.pdf>
- U.S. Department of Justice. (2004) Toward Safe and Orderly Schools—The National Study of Delinquency Prevention in Schools (NCJ 205005). Available at <http://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/205005.pdf>

REFERENCES

- Brank, E. M., et al. (2007). Will they tell? Weapons reporting by middle-school youth. Youth Violence and Juvenile Justice, 5, 125-146.
- Brown, B. (2004). Juveniles and weapons: Recent research, conceptual considerations and programmatic interventions. Youth Violence and Juvenile Justice, 2, 161-184.
- Center for Disease Control. (2008). Understanding School Violence Fact Sheet. Available at http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/SchoolViolence_FactSheet-a.pdf
- Dinkes, R., Kemp, J., & Baum, K. (2009). Indicators of School Crime and Safety: 2008 (NCES 2009-022/NCJ226343). National Center for Education
- Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education and Bureau of Justice Statistics, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice. Washington, DC. Available at <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/abstract/iscs08.htm>.
- Dwyer, K., & Osher, D. 2000. Safeguarding Our Children: An Action Guide. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, U. S. Department of Justice and American Institutes for Research. Available at http://www.ed.gov/admins/lead/safety/actguide/action_guide.pdf
- Educational Resources Information Center (2000). How Can We Prevent Violence in Our Schools? Department of Education. Available at <http://web.archive.org/web/20030402004316/> and <http://www.eric.ed.gov/resources/parent/prevent.html>
- United States Secret Service and United States Department of Education. (2002). The Final Report and Findings of the Safe School Initiative: Implications for the Prevention of School Attacks in the United States. Available at <http://web.archive.org/web/20030406091242/www.ed.gov/offices/OSDFS/preventingattacksreport.pdf>



Contact Us

814 824 2327
civicinstitute.org

501 East 38th St.
Erie, PA 16546

The Civic Column

[[*Strengthening our community through education and awareness*]]