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ABSTRACT

This brief summarizes what is presently known about violence in schools and provides recommendations for preventing the violence. The following findings are presented concerning the prevalence of school violence: (1) both teachers and students are in greater danger of losing their property through theft than of being assaulted or robbed; (2) both teachers and students tend to be victimized more violently in larger cities; (3) rates of assaults on and robberies of students were twice as great in junior high schools as in senior high schools; and (4) there is no difference in the robbery rate of teachers in junior and senior high schools except in the largest cities. The following survey findings are presented concerning reactions to school violence: (1) four percent of all secondary school students said that they stayed home from school out of fear at least once in the past month; and (2) 12 percent of secondary school teachers said that they had hesitated to confront misbehaving students in the past month. The following findings are presented concerning perpetrators of school violence: (1) students are the main perpetrators nationwide; and (2) in large cities the majority of perpetrators are strangers to the victims. Recommendations are made to lower the compulsory attendance age to 15 or lower in order to eliminate those students who view school as a prison or as a compulsory recreation center, and thus provide a safe environment for those who want to attend. Six tables and seven references are included. (JS)

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Research in Brief

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Violence in Schools

by Jackson Toby

Mass media accounts of rapes and robberies inside schools are especially shocking because parents send children to school to improve their minds, not to expose them to danger. Students and teachers do not expect to be assaulted or robbed in school. And in most public schools—as well as in the overwhelming majority of private and parochial schools—this expectation of an orderly routine is confirmed by experience. But the traditional expectation that schools are safe places for children is changing.

The Prevalence of School Violence

According to two national studies of school crime, most school crime, like most crime outside of school, is nonviolent. One study, conducted by the National Institute of Education (NIE) in 1976 (U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare 1978), was a victimization survey of 31,373 students and 23,895 teachers in more than 600 public secondary schools in the United States. Table 1, derived from that survey, compares the rate of nonviolent theft from teachers with the rates of two violent offenses, assault and robbery. Clearly, teachers were in much greater danger of losing their property through stealth than of being assaulted or robbed. The parallel data for students—reproduced in Table 2—also show that nonviolent theft is more common than assault and robbery, but not by as wide a margin. Careful study of Tables 1 and 2 shows something else: both teachers and students tend to be victimized more violently in the larger cities. Violent crimes in school are relatively more common in cities of more than 500,000 population than in smaller communities.

The second study was derived from National Crime Survey data collected in 1974 and 1975 by the Bureau of the Census in 26 big cities. The National Crime Survey, a household survey of victimizations of all persons over 12 years of age, includes a question asking *where* the crime occurred, one response category is "inside school." Thus, it was possible to aggregate the data on victimizations that occurred in schools for all 26 cities to provide national estimates of school crime in the largest

From the Director

Concern about the extent of crime and violence in the Nation's public schools is widespread. The Attorney General's Task Force on Violent Crime, noting that crime, violence, and drugs have no place in our schools, recommended vigorous action to deal with crime and fear in school.

The National Institute of Justice has responded to that recommendation. In cooperation with the Department of Education and the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, we have launched an initiative to develop and test more effective methods to help schools deal with crime.

While that research proceeds, we believe it is important to share information about the scope and nature of the problem and perspectives on how best to deal with it. To that end, the Institute is publishing this brief on school violence in the hope that it will be a useful source of current information and stimulate continuing debate about possible solutions.

This brief is based on an article published in *Crime and Justice: An Annual Review of Research*, a book series supported by the National Institute of Justice. *Crime and Justice* articles are commissioned from leading scholars. Each is asked to summarize what we know about a significant topic and what gaps in our understanding remain. Only the best of the commissioned essays are published, and from these a few are selected to serve as the bases for research briefs.

Crime and Justice essays deal with complex topics and provide often provocative analyses of difficult issues. The views and conclusions summarized here are, of course, those of the writer, and do not represent the official view of the National Institute of Justice.

James K. Stewart
Director

American cities (U S. Department of Justice 1979) Table 3, based on these data, shows that, in the central cities, nonviolent offenses also predominate

Fear of School Violence

Although school violence is less common than nonviolent theft, even in the schools of the biggest cities, violent school crimes arouse destructive fears among students, parents, and teachers. Hence, the consequences of violent crimes for the schools are more serious than their numbers might suggest. Four percent of all secondary school students in public schools said that they stayed home from school out of fear at least once in the month before the survey: but, *in the largest cities*, 7 percent of the senior high school students said this, as did 8 percent of the junior high school students. Teachers, although they were less likely to be victims of violence than students, also responded in terms of their fears. Twelve percent of the secondary school teachers nationwide said that they had hesitated to confront misbehaving students in the month preceding the survey out of fear for their own safety, 28 percent of the teachers *in the largest cities* said so. Furthermore, the fear responses of both students and teachers would have been greater if the study had asked about behavior over the entire year. No doubt, student and teacher transfers from the more violent schools reflect these fears.

TABLE 1
Percentage of Teachers Victimized in Public Schools over a Two-Month Period in 1976

Size of Community	By Larcenies		By Assaults		By Robberies	
	In Junior High Schools	In Senior High Schools	In Junior High Schools	In Senior High Schools	In Junior High Schools	In Senior High Schools
500,000 or more	31 4%	21 6%	2 1%	1 4%	1 4%	1 1%
100,000–499,999	24 5	22 8	1 1	1 0	0 7	0 9
50,000-99,999	21 0	19 3	0 2	0 3	0 3	0 4
10,000–49,000	20 8	16 5	0 6	0 3	0 5	0 4
2,500-9,999	16 9	19 1	0 3	0 2	0 4	0 4
Under 2,500	15 9	18 5	0 2	0 2	0 0	0 4
All communities	22 1	19 3	0 8	0 5	0 6	0 6

Source Special tabulation of data from U S Department of Health, Education, and Welfare 1978

TABLE 2
Percentage of Students Victimized in Public Schools over a One-Month Period in 1976

Size of Community	By Larcenies		By Assaults		By Robberies	
	In Junior High Schools	In Senior High Schools	In Junior High Schools	In Senior High Schools	In Junior High Schools	In Senior High Schools
500,000 or more	14 8%	14 9%	8 5%	3 7%	7%	2 8%
100,000–499,999	18 0	16 8	7 8	2 7		1 9
50,000-99,999	18 0	15 3	7 7	2 9	3 8	1 3
10,000–49,000	15 5	15 8	6 8	2 7	3 3	1 4
2,500-9,999	16 1	14 6	7 4	3 1	3 5	1 4
Under 2,500	15 8	14	6 2	3 5	3 8	2 0
All communities	16 0	15 2	7 3	3 1	3 9	1 8

Source Special tabulation of data from U S Department of Health, Education, and Welfare 1978

The Perpetrators of School Violence: Students and Intruders

The NIE study concluded that *students* were the main perpetrators of school violence because most victims of assaults and robberies identified the perpetrators as students (U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare 1978, p. 98). This conclusion is appropriate for the United States as a whole, but not for the big cities where school violence is a greater problem than in small cities or rural areas. Table 4, derived from the 26-city data of the National Crime Survey, shows that the majority of perpetrators of school violence are strangers to the victims. Presumably they were trespassers or, as school officials call them, "intruders."

One type of intruder is the stereotypical predator—completely alien to the school, perhaps not even a resident of the surrounding neighborhood. Other intruders are marginal members of the school community, an angry parent intent on beating up the child's teacher, friends or enemies of enrolled students, suspended students who prefer a warm, dry school building to the streets. Both kinds of intruders contribute to school violence, especially in big cities, and big-city schools are right to develop security programs to keep them out.

This research brief is a summary of an essay on school violence by Jackson Toby that appeared in Volume 4 of *Crime and Justice—An Annual Review of Research*, an annual collection of state-of-the-art essays on criminological research that is supported by the National Institute of Justice, edited by Michael Tonry and Norval Morris, and published by the University of Chicago Press.

TABLE 3
Estimated Numbers of In-School Victimizations
Twenty-six Cities Aggregate, 1974-1975[a]

Type of Victimization	Status of Victim: Student	Status of Victim: Teachers and Others
Rape	390[b]	139[b]
Robbery	13,185	1 808
Aggravated assault	6,528	2,900
Simple assault	15,261	5,597
Larceny with contact	4,853	1,005[b]
Larceny without contact	172,027	46,513
Total	212,244	58,053

Source: U S Department of Justice 1979, p 37

[a]Atlanta, Baltimore, Boston, Buffalo, Chicago, Cincinnati, Cleveland, Dallas, Denver, Detroit, Houston, Los Angeles, Miami, Milwaukee, Minneapolis, New Orleans, Newark, New York, Oakland, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Portland, San Diego, San Francisco, St Louis, and Washington, D C

[b]Estimate, based on fewer than 50 sample cases, may be statistically unreliable

TABLE 4
Estimated Percentages of Stranger Offenses in In-School Victimization, Twenty-six Cities Aggregate, 1974-75

Type of Victimization	Percentage of Stranger Offenses by Status of Victims: Students	Percentage of Stranger Offenses by Status of Victims: Teachers and Others
Rape	94%*	100%*
Robbery	81 *	85
Aggravated assault	66	71
Simple assault	60	57

Source U S Department of Justice 1979, p 30

*Estimate based on fewer than 50 sample cases, may be statistically unreliable

Clues to the Prevention of School Violence

Victims of school violence provide descriptive information about perpetrators. The bulk of the perpetrators in the 26-city study were adolescent or young-adult males. As Table 5 indicates, only when the victims were female *students* were the perpetrators predominantly females: this results mostly from assault patterns.

And, although blacks constituted only 29 percent of the general population in the 26 cities, three-quarters of the perpetrators of violent offenses were black. As Table 6 shows, this pattern holds up for all categories of victims. Finally, more than a quarter of the robberies and the aggravated assaults were carried out by groups of three or more perpetrators—in one sense, gangs.

These data about perpetrators do not immediately suggest programs to prevent school violence. More promising is the finding in Table 2 that the rates of assaults on and robberies of *students* were twice as great in junior high schools as in senior high schools. On the other hand, Table 1 showed no difference in the robbery rate of *teachers* in junior and senior high schools and little difference in the rate of assault on teachers except in the largest cities. I interpret these data as follows:

(1) Junior high schools have higher rates of assault on and robberies of *students* than senior high schools because other students are the main perpetrators of violence against students in junior high schools. Why should junior high schools be twice as dangerous for students as senior high schools? Junior high schools contain higher proportions of involuntary students. Many unwilling students drop out in the early years of senior high school when no longer subject to the compulsory attendance law of their State. On the assumption that these alienated students are potentially the most violent, their dropping out explains the reduction of violence against students in the senior high schools.

(2) Teachers are more likely to be robbed by *intruders* than by students. Since intruders trespass into senior and junior high schools to approximately the same extent, the rate of robbery of *teachers* should be similar in junior and senior high schools, which is the case. Teachers are assaulted both by intruders and by students. The rate is about the same in junior and senior high schools because intruders are equally likely to assault teachers in the two contexts, and students, though they are more rebellious in junior high, are also smaller than high school students.

This line of reasoning suggests that student-initiated violence in public schools can be reduced provided that attending students want to be in the school for educational purposes rather than to comply with the law. If, on the other hand, they regard the school as a prison or as a compulsory recreation center, school violence will be difficult to control. One way to achieve greater voluntarism in school enrollment is to try harder to persuade adolescents that education is worth taking seriously. In the light of past efforts to convince

TABLE 5

Percentage Distribution of Perceived Sex of Offender(s) by Sex and Status of Victim in In-School Victimization, Twenty-six Cities Aggregate, 1974-75.

Status and Sex of Victims	Perceived Sex of Offender(s)				Estimated Number of Victimizations
	Male	Female	Both[a]	Don't Know	
Students					
Male	96%[b]	1%	1%	1%	28,852
Female	33	60	4	3	17,591
Teachers					
Male	80	6	3	11	2,618
Female	62	25	4	9	4,024
Others					
Male	90	2	3	4	4,316
Female	63	32	3	2	4,605

Source: U.S. Department of Justice 1979, p. 34

Note: Excludes those larceny without contact victimizations in which the victim was not present at the immediate scene of the crime. Also excludes those victimizations in which the victim did not know whether there was more than one offender.

[a]Group of offenders containing both male and female offenders.

[b]All percentages in this table are row percentages.

TABLE 6

Percentage Distribution of Perceived Race of Offender(s) by Race and Status of Victim in In-School Victimization, Twenty-six Cities Aggregate, 1974-75.

Status and Race of Victims	Perceived Race of Offender(s)				Estimated Number of Victimizations
	White	Black/ Other	Mixed[a]	Don't Know	
Students					
White	30%[b]	65%	3%	2%	30,173
Black/other	6	88	1	5	16,079
Teachers					
White	19	67	1	12	5,609
Black/other	20	77	0	3	948[c]
Others					
White	32	65	1	3	6,737
Black/other	3	92	1	4	2,163

Source: U.S. Department of Justice 1979, p. 33

Note: Excludes those larceny without contact victimizations in which the victim was not present at the immediate scene of the crime. Also excludes those victimizations in which the victim did not know whether there was more than one offender.

[a]Group offenders containing some combination of white, black, and other race offenders.

[b]All percentages in this table are row percentages.

[c]Estimate, based on fewer than fifty sample cases, may be statistically unreliable.

children that education "pays" in monetary as well as nonmonetary terms, this approach seems utopian. Another approach is to recognize that the physical presence of a youngster in a building called a school, though a *prerequisite* for education, does not guarantee that education will take place. In short, compulsory enrollment is a weak educational tool; it may not even produce regular attendance, much less the completion of homework, attentiveness in class, and nonviolent behavior toward classmates.

This being so, reduction of the age of compulsory enrollment to 15 or lower might improve the educational climate of public schools at the same time as it makes schools safer places for students and staff. Such a reduction would imply a shift toward a more paramount educational mission for the schools and away from schools as multipurpose institutions, part educational, part recreational, part incarcerative. It would be useless to insist that enrolled students be more firmly committed to education if those who chose not to remain enrolled could infiltrate school buildings at will. Students who must deal with the pressures of school should not be required also to deal with social problems caused by intruders. Continued vigilance would be necessary to prevent intruders, including dropouts, from making disruptive forays into school buildings. Only when the lines are sharply drawn between education and the streets will it be possible to tell whether increasing the voluntariness of public education can reduce school violence appreciably.

The genie cannot be stuffed back into the bottle. Now that school violence has become a national concern, it is difficult to accept violent schools with fatalistic resignation. Eventually, solutions will be discovered. The alternative would be the erosion of public secondary education.

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