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ABSTRACT

More than one third of Americans think that reducing school violence is the top challenge facing public schools. The challenge posed by National Education Goal 7 is that, by the year 2000, schools will be free of violence. Despite increased concern about school violence and pursuit of this lofty national goal, this paper presents the argument that it is time to reflect on what is actually known about school violence. Empirical studies about school violence are reviewed, particularly as they relate to weapons possession, perception of personal security, victimization patterns, and perceptions of campus conditions associated with environments conducive to learning. These studies are drawn from multidisciplinary literature sources and the results of the California School Climate and Safety Survey. It is shown that schools are not infested with violence and that teachers and students generally feel safe in their home schools. It is argued that school safety plans should be informed by local information and not driven primarily by national studies or media reports. (Contains 34 references and 5 tables)
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Status Update of Research Related to National Education Goal Seven:

School Violence Content Area

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Running head: Research Update: School Violence

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Abstract

More than one third of Americans think that reducing school violence is the top challenge facing public schools and the challenge posed by National Education Goal Seven is that by the year 2000 schools will be free of violence. Despite increased concern about school violence and pursuit of this lofty national goal, we argue that it is time to reflect on what is actually known about school violence. Empirical studies about school violence are reviewed, particularly as they relate to weapons possession, perception of personal security, victimization patterns, and perceptions of campus conditions associated with environments conducive to learning. These studies are drawn from multidisciplinary literature sources and the results of the California School Climate and Safety Survey conducted by the authors. It is shown that schools are not infested with violence and that teachers and students generally feel safe in their home schools. It is argued that school safety plans should be informed by local information and not driven primarily by national studies or media reports.

Status Update of Research Related to National Education Goal Seven:

School Violence Content Area

Attempts to convey that learning requires a safe, secure, and peaceful school environment have relied on reports of sensationalistic incidents of crime and violence. This strategy has influenced 36% of the American public to believe that fighting/violence/gangs and discipline are the most pressing problem facing schools (Elam, Rose, & Gallup, 1994). In addition, only 21% of the students report that their fellow students are safe in schools (Harris, 1993) and 55% indicate that students talk about school violence "sometimes" or "very often" (Metropolitan Life, 1993). This preoccupation with school violence comes from the highest levels with classrooms in America being described by some as "warzones."

Not all opinion surveys support the conclusion schools are infested with crime and violence. In one survey (Metropolitan Life, 1993), 99% of teachers and 90% of students indicated that they felt safe at their own schools. In another, adults tended to rate America's public education system more poorly than the school of their eldest child—22% gave the nation's schools an "A" or "B" grade, but 70% gave these high grades to their child's school (Elam, Rose, & Gallup, 1994). These findings suggest that the public is concerned in general about school violence, but they have less concern about the safety of their own home schools.

Given the mixture of research findings about school violence, we propose that it is time to suspend alarmist claims and to evaluate what is objectively known about its prevalence. This will help ensure that school safety efforts are not subject to the emotionalism generated by media portrayals.

School Safety Perspectives

School safety as a personal experience. In any discussion of school safety and violence data are often presented in an aggregated format. Whatever patterns are found in such aggregated information, they obviously do not negate any single incident of violence on a school campus. Each student and adult has a "most serious" incident of violence that occurred to them on a school campus. For some, this event was extreme and caused trauma and personal tragedy. It is clear that National Education Goal Seven challenges all educators to take steps to ensure that such trauma does not occur on school campuses. Goal Seven presents a very rigorous performance criterion: schools will be FREE of drugs and violence. This standard of "no harm to anyone at any time" is unique and very stringent.

What is school violence? Common sense suggests that everyone shares a frame of reference when they use the term "school violence," however, some research suggests that this is not the case. In the only study to examine personal definitions of the school violence, Kameoka (1988) asked recent high school graduates to retrospectively identify the types of violence that occurred to them, while in school, and to rate the level of violence associated with these incidents. The incident with the highest mean violence rating was sexual assault, but interestingly about one fourth of the respondents rated it as completely non-violent.

Within schools, potential differences of definitions of school violence have surfaced. For example, in the recent Metropolitan Life Teacher Survey (Metropolitan Life, 1993), students were asked if they had been the victim of various intrusive acts at school during the preceding year. A number of the students reported that they had been verbally insulted (60%), threatened (26%), pushed or shoved (43%), kicked/bitten (24%), or had something stolen from them

(43%). Yet, when specifically asked if they had EVER been the "victim of a violent act" at school, only 23% of the same students said yes. This suggests that students are often victimized at school by less serious incidents, but they do not consider these acts to be "violent."

School safety myths. Given America's fascination with polls, surveys, and numbers (Crossen, 1994), it is not surprising that some myths about school violence have evolved. One example of misinterpretation of existing data are numerous references to the 1991 version of the Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance Survey (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 1991), in which 26% of high school students reported carrying weapons (knives, guns, clubs, etc.) in the month prior to the survey. The survey question did not specify whether or not this weapons carrying occurred on or off campus. In subsequent reports (e.g., Pacific Center for Violence Prevention, 1994), however, these data were interpreted to show how many students carry weapons or guns on a school campus. As far as we can tell, these data are the source of the varying estimates of how many guns are present each day on school campuses across America. In fact, there is no national data base from which to accurately estimate the number of guns present on school campuses on any given day.

Other misinformation about school violence was generated by outright fabrication. The most notable example of this is the widespread reference to a list of school concerns that compare the top school problems of the 1940s (or in some instances the 1950s) with those of contemporary schools. In fact, O'Neill investigated the origin of the "school problem" list and discovered that it was fabricated in the late 1970s by a Texas oil millionaire who had an anti-public school

agenda (O'Neill, 1994). This striking example shows how discussion about school violence can be driven by misinformation or the compilation of information from second-hand sources, notably news media, to support a prespecified agenda.

Status of America's Schools with Respect to National Education Goal Seven

Because the objective of Goal Seven is to create schools where students not only "survive" (free of violence) by "thrive" (an environment conducive to learning), we present data related to positive and negative campus conditions. Information is drawn from research in the public health, juvenile justice, and education fields. Where appropriate, data are presented from a study we conducted involving approximately 8,000 students from schools in southern California, who were administered the California School Climate and Safety Survey during 1994 (Furlong, Chung, & Bates, 1994; Morrison et al., 1994).

Homicides on School Campuses

Since the mid-1980s, the homicide rate involving school-aged children has increased, particularly among those in the 15- to 17-year age range. Cornell (1993) conducted a careful analysis of recent changes in juvenile homicide by examining data from the Federal Bureau of Investigation's Supplemental Homicide Report for homicides committed during the years 1984 and 1991 by juveniles ages 10 to 17. There were 1,668 juveniles arrested for homicide in 1991 compared with 732 arrests in 1984 (a recent historic low). These homicides were committed almost exclusively by males (86.5% in 1984 vs. 93.5% in 1991), and increasingly by African-Americans (53.8% of all homicides in 1984 vs. 73.9% in 1991). Cornell (1993) argues that there were both quantitative and qualitative changes in the

pattern of homicides, with recent incidents involving more likely to involve crime-related encounters and greater use of handguns. It is important to keep in mind that these data are not an exact count of all homicides committed by juveniles, but they are a representative sample.

In another study involving 202 serious juvenile offenders in Virginia, Cornell (1990) found that between 1977 and 1987 nearly one half of juvenile homicides could be classified as impulsive reactions to interpersonal conflict, the remainder involved some form of criminal activity.

Despite increased concern about K-12 student involvement in homicides, there is no national data base to track homicides or serious assaults (e.g., shootings and stabbings) that occur on school grounds during regular school hours. Thus far, attempts to track this information have relied on media reports of homicides and shootings. Such a study, conducted by the Center to Prevent Handgun Violence (1990) in the late 1980s, found that during a five-year period, 71 individuals (65 students and 6 staff) were murdered and 201 individuals were wounded by gunfire on school campuses. Deaths occurred in 24 states.

If homicides and serious assaults alone are used as the criteria to judge the safety of America's schools, given with the total number of homicides committed annually by youth and the total annual number of youth homicide victims, very few occur at school. Using this extreme index of safety, schools are our children's safest public setting.

Unauthorized Presence of Firearms and Other Weapons

Newspaper headlines and captions describing school-aged children as "Armed and Dangerous" and schools as "Trigger-Happy" convey public concern about the

presence of guns on school campuses (Larson, 1994). There are two sources of information about gun possession at schools: official state crime reports and student self-reports. Official crime data are available in only a few states (e.g., California, Florida, South Carolina, Virginia, and North Carolina ; Furlong & Morrison, 1994). and these data are of vastly different quality. Some come from an official census of specific events, whereas others are based on the recollections of administrators.

The best information currently available about guns on campus comes from student self-reports (American School Health Association, 1989; Harris, 1993; Kingery, Mirazee, Pruitt, & Hurley, 1990; Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority, 1991; Sheley, McGee, & Wright, 1992). These studies find that between 3% to 6% of secondary school students report having possessed a gun at school during the year prior to the survey. The highest figure was found by Sheley et al. (1992), who reported a 9% rate for inner-city male students. A recent survey of nearly 200,000 youth nationwide by PRIDE (1995), an Atlanta-based drug abuse prevention organization, found that 4.3% of sixth- to eight-graders and 7.4% of ninth- to twelfth-graders reported EVER "carrying a gun to school." This latter finding demonstrates that short-term rates (over the past year) are not much different than long-term (ever) rates, suggesting that gun possession at school involves a small group of repeat offenders.

Possession of any weapon on campus is dangerous, but it is erroneous to presume that all weapons, including guns, are brought to school because of concerns about safety. Using data from the National Crime Victimization Survey, School Supplement, Bastian and Taylor (1991) report that only 3% of males and

1% of females report EVER bringing a gun to school. The important caveat here is that their question specified that the weapon was brought for the student's protection. From the limited available information, it appears that students bring weapons to campus for a variety of reasons, not only because of fear of violence.

Another way to assess gun presence on campuses is to ask students if they personally saw a gun or were threatened by someone with a gun on campus. In our survey of California students in grades 5 to 12, 9.8% of suburban students and 11.7% of urban seventh-graders reported personally seeing a gun on their campus in the month prior to the survey. In addition, 5.4% of suburban students and 6.9% of urban students reported being threatened by a gun and seeing it. These rates are higher than those found in surveys that have asked students to report about their own weapon possession.

Finally, other studies have examined student self-reports of the possession of other weapons at school (e.g., Bastian & Taylor, 1991; Harris, 1993; Kingery et al., 1990; Turner, 1989). These studies consistently show that students report carrying other weapons to school at higher rates than guns, with knives being the most common weapon on school campuses. In addition, in one of the few studies that explicitly asked about gun possession at school and in the community, Sheley et al. (1992) found that inner-city boys were nearly four times more likely to report carrying a gun in the community (35%) than at school (9%)—girls had the same pattern (11% community vs. 3% school).

Perceptions of Campus Security and Safety

General Perception of Campus Safety Conditions. Some items in the California School Climate and Safety Survey inquire about how often students

perceive dangerous conditions to occur on their school campus. Results show that less than one half of urban and suburban students thought that drug use, vandalism, alcohol consumption, fights, stealing, bullying, or weapons possession happen "quite a bit" or "very much" on their school campus. Nonetheless, a sizable number of students feel that these behaviors occur frequently on their campus, with the exception of weapon possession. In fact, weapon possession is consistently reported as occurring the least frequently of the seven behaviors listed above. As shown in Figure 1, there are noticeable differences by grade level, with older students reporting more frequent drug/alcohol use and weapon possession. Younger students report more fighting and bullying. What is of interest is that although a number of students reported that these danger-related behaviors occurred frequently on their campus, relatively fewer indicated that school violence was among their biggest personal worries. As shown in Figure 2, 11% of the students from the suburban sample indicated that they were most worried about school violence. The modal concern of the students was getting good marks in their classes. The same pattern held for seventh-graders from inner-city schools, however, more of them, 22%, said they were most worried about school violence.

Insert Figures 1 and 2 about here

Personal Feelings of Safety. Perceptions of school safety were examined in studies conducted by the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing (Dear, 1995) and by Furlong, Babinski, Poland, Muñoz, and Boles (1994). School board members, recently credentialed educators, teacher trainers, and participants in focus

group discussions about the causes and solutions of school violence were asked to describe the size of the school violence problem at their school. Only 2% to 4% of the respondents indicated that there was a “very big” school violence problem at their school. Only the focus group members, who gathered specifically to discuss school violence, tended to say their schools were violent. These results are consistent with those reported in Violent Schools, Safe Schools (National Institute of Education, 1978) and suggest that the public has heightened concern about school violence, but generally do not feel that their schools are particularly unsafe.

In the California School Climate and Safety Survey, we asked students the same safety item included in the NELS project (“I do not feel safe at this school”). The results showed that more inner-city students (18%) than suburban students (10%) reported feeling unsafe at school, results similar to those reported by the NELS project. It is important to note that most students report feeling safe at school most of the time—unsafe feelings are unstable over time. Support for this observation comes from the Metropolitan Life (1993) survey. Here, only slightly more teachers and students felt that violence at school had increased during the past year, and a large majority reported that it was about the same. Only law enforcement officers (more than 40%) felt that school violence had increased.

Other findings from our survey suggest that perceptions of “feeling safe” at school are influenced by more than actual violence victimization. As shown in Figure 3, students in the fifth and sixth grades reported being most concerned about school violence, despite the fact that they reported lower levels of victimization. It appears that responses to global questions about feelings of personal security are affected by development and maturation processes. Younger students have more

fears than older students and the widespread portrayal of youth as perpetrators and victims of violence (see Kunkel, in press) may exacerbate these natural developmental fears.

Insert Figure 3 about here

School Violence Victimization Patterns

Since the Violent Schools, Safe Schools study (National Institute of Education, 1978), there have been surprisingly few comprehensive studies of violence victimization of students on campuses. The most extensive recent study is the School Crime Supplement to the National Crime Victimization Survey (Bastian & Taylor, 1991; Whitaker & Bastian, 1991). This study involved an extensive personal interview of a random sample of youth ages 12 to 19 across the United States. These respondents indicated how often they had been the victim of various forms of personal and property crimes on school campuses in the six months prior to the interview. In this self-report survey, 9% of the students indicated that they had been the victim of at least one crime, but only 2% report crimes involving personal violence—most of these being simple physical assaults (Bastian & Taylor, 1991). The pattern of victimization was similar in urban and rural areas, for boys and girls, and across racial/ethnic groups (Bastian & Taylor, 1991), a finding that runs counter to common stereotypes. Schools, it turns out, were also not the most likely place for crimes to occur to youth, despite the fact that students spend much of the day in that setting (Whitaker & Bastian, 1991).

Higher victimization rates were reported by students in a survey conducted by the American School Health Association (1989). In this study 14% of the students reported being "robbed" and 14% being "attacked" at school or on a school bus.

In our own survey, we asked students to indicate if during the previous month they had personally experienced any of 21 different types of events involving bullying, harassment, property intrusion, serious physical intrusion, or threats related to antisocial behavior. The data in Figure 4 show the percentage of pupils from suburban schools districts who acknowledged that each of the incidents happened to them in the previous month. (The labels in Figure 4 are abbreviated. A copy of the California School Climate and Safety Survey is available upon request.)

As shown in Figure 4, behaviors falling in the bullying area (taunting, grabbing, punching, staring down, threatened) were generally the most frequently reported incidents followed by harassment behaviors. This pattern was robust across the more than 30 schools surveyed and strongly suggests that bullying behavior, by far, is the most frequently occurring form of school violence (see also Batsche & Knoff, 1994). Other frequently reported victimization behaviors included seeing a knife on campus, theft of personal property, and sexual harassment. Although among the least frequently reported incidents, about 1 in 20 students reported being threatened by someone using a gun or knife.

Insert Figure 4 and Figure 5 about here

In our sample of seventh-grade students from inner-city schools, a similar pattern of victimization was found, with the exception that they had higher rates of having property stolen (53.2%).

In summary, there is some discrepancy among studies examining student self-reported violence victimization on school campuses. The National Crime Victimization Survey, School Crime Supplement had an obvious crime focus and it produced the lowest reported victimization rates. The next lowest rates were found in the American School Health Association survey, which asked students to indicate if they had been victimized by using global terms such as "robbed" or "assaulted." The highest rates are found in our own survey, which avoided reference to school crime and asked about victimization in behaviorally specific terms. Which procedure is the most desirable to use is a matter yet to be determined, but the test of all information should be if it facilitates school safety planning.

Student Perceptions of a Campus Environment Conducive to Learning

To date school safety researchers have paid little attention to factors associated with a school environment "conducive to learning." Drawing upon school effectiveness and school climate research, Morrison et al. (1994) present a school environment model that describes how the physical, social, and cultural environments of a school contribute to the creation of a caring, nurturing, and supportive school. Testing this model's hypothesis that violence victimization is higher among students with fewer social connection to peers and teachers, Furlong, Chung, and Bates (1994) found that students with multiple types of victimization were significantly less likely than students reporting no victimization to report having close relationships with teachers. These preliminary findings suggest that it

is important to evaluate students' perceptions of the general school climate when conducting school safety surveys.

Data from our survey of students in California provide mixed findings about students' perceptions of caring school environments. As shown in Figures 5, a majority of students from our survey's suburban schools indicate that they feel that they belong at school and that they have a lot of friends. In contrast, only a minority perceive their schools as being places where they can trust people or where people really care about one another. These perceptions were similar across males and females. Another important observation is that a sizable number of students choose the middle option on the five-point response scale, indicating some ambiguity about how much trust and caring they perceived in their schools. Nonetheless, these data suggest that many students in our surveys do not experience their schools as being places that are interpersonally supportive.

Using Surveys to Support Safe School Planning

Our primary objective in this paper was to provide objective information about violence that occurs at schools in the hope that it would temper and guide future discussions. We are not suggesting that there is no reason to be concerned about violence that occurs at schools; in fact, we strongly advocate the development of comprehensive school safety plans in all schools (see California Department of Education, 1989; Dear, 1995; Furlong, Morrison, & Clontz, 1991; Ontario Ministry of Education, 1994; Safe Schools Project, 1993). Nonetheless, we are convinced that public discussions about school violence are not well-served by reference to myths, misinformation, and appeals to uninformed fears and anxieties. For this reason, schools developing school safety plans should include mechanisms

to collect objective information about campus conditions associated with the occurrence of incidents that harm students and staff. There are a number of resources available to support these efforts (see Furlong, 1994 for a discussion of various instruments available to conduct safety surveys). Among the procedures are carefully constructed and implemented surveys of the campus community that ask about their experiences and perceptions of THEIR school campus. The data from the California School Climate and Safety Survey presented in this paper were collected as part of a general safe school planning process and show the type of information that can be generated at the school level. Our experience has shown that local school safety plans should not be based on reactions to events that occur in other communities, or those reported in various news media. Safe schools plans should reflect the day-to-day experiences of students and staff at specific schools.

Most importantly, surveys designed to "take the pulse" of the school community are effective when there is a commitment to use them over an extended period of time. The collection of data, from whatever source, about school safety conditions is not only a product, it is part of the process of reaching out to the school community to seek their feedback, guidance, and ultimately support for implementing collaborative school safety actions. The objective of safety planning is to (a) reduce the actual risk of harm to students and staff, (b) increase individuals' sense of personal security, and (c) to use concern about personal security as leverage to improve the overall quality of the school's educational program. Schools electing to conduct safety surveys, as described in this paper, will want to attend to five basic standards:

1. All assessments should be completed in the context of a careful, local school climate and safety planning process. Data collected without an organized, prespecified purpose serves no useful function.

2. The school community should be involved in planning the logistics of doing the survey. The quality of the data is enhanced when teachers and students understand why the survey is being conducted and how the results will be used.

3. School site safety teams should ask for the views of as many students, teachers, and parents as possible. Asking for opinions increases awareness and helps to make school safety a positive, top priority.

4. Surveys are most informative when they include procedures for discussing reactions immediately after the questionnaire is completed. Classroom lessons, focus groups, and community meetings are methods of obtaining more personal views of what is behind the numbers.

5. A number of ethical questions and related responsibilities are raised when a safety survey is conducted. Make sure that privacy and anonymity of individuals are maintained. Try to anticipate potential adverse reactions, especially among individuals who may have been previously victimized on campus. Make sure that there is commitment to use the survey information in helpful and productive ways. Work with local school boards and media to help them reframe the survey process as a positive, proactive step to make schools safer.

Summary

Despite justified concern about violence that occurs at schools, there is also reason to be optimistic about their future. Schools are places where adults care for pupils. They are places where more youth graduate from high school than at any

time in the past; places where more students aspire for college and graduate training than at any time in the past; and places where the vast majority of students and teachers report feeling safe. Here are what the voices of some students have told us about their schools:

- “I love the teachers at my school—they are positive and encouraging.”
- “The people, lunch, choir are awesome—education is quality.”
- “The people I meet are nice—my friends mean a lot to me.”

These are the voices of hope, not despair.

Nonetheless, the information reviewed in this paper does indicate that schools can be improved. Students experience harmful events on campuses and they deserve our support. As we move forward to help schools meet the stringent standard of creating environments that are “free of violence,” it is critical that the rhetoric used to justify the commitment of public resources to reduce school violence does not overwhelm schools with negative, misleading publicity. We must be careful to define school violence as a stress and risk factor in our children’s lives (Morrison et al., 1994). It would be sad indeed if all of the discussion about how to make our schools safer, to help our children learn more effectively, results in the proliferation of attitudes that define our children as being the problem itself. Such a conclusion is unwarranted by the data presented in this paper. A school’s best defense against such inappropriate characterizations of schools or children is to collect local information about campus safety conditions and formulate a plan to address the identified concerns.

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Figure Captions.

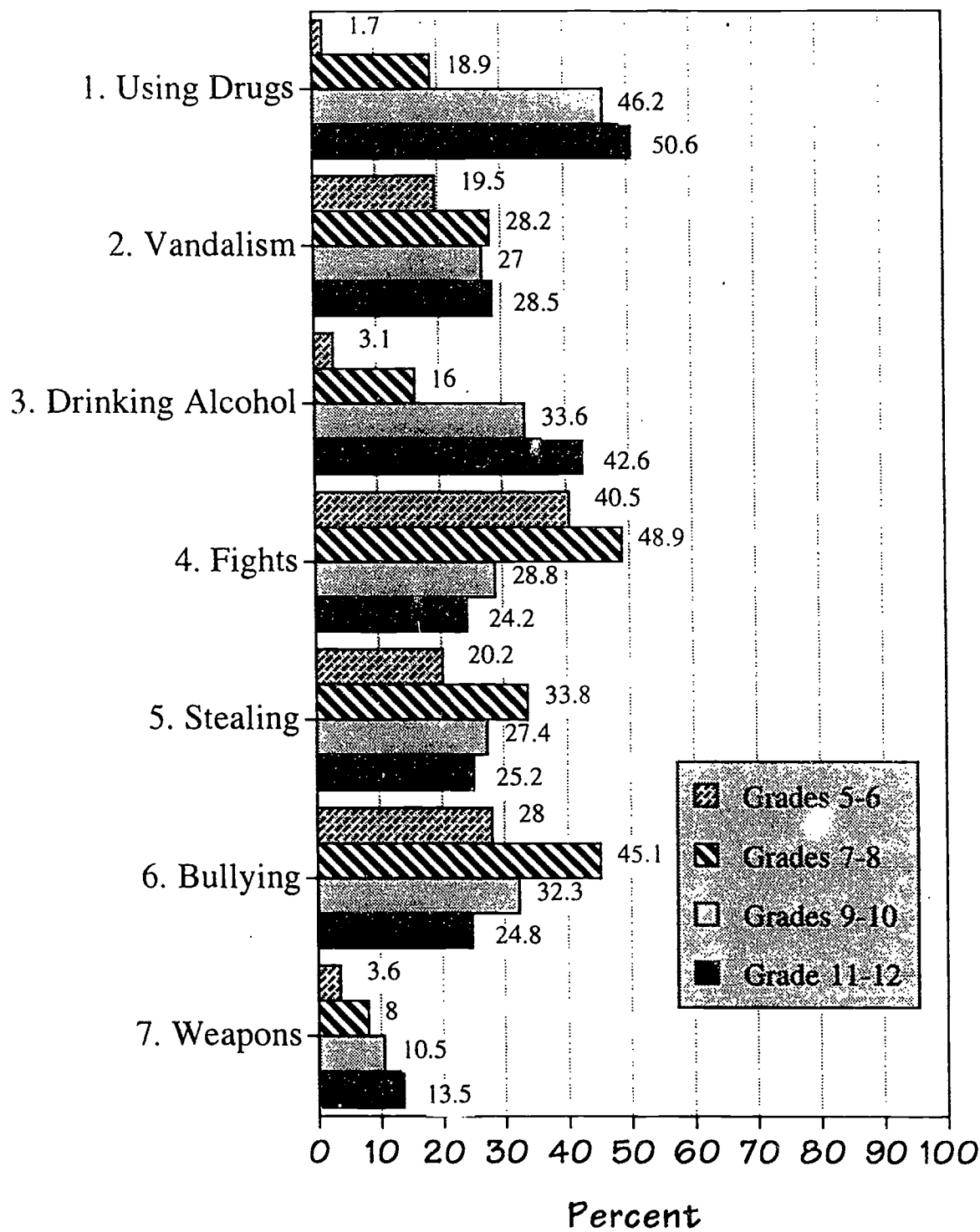
Figure 1. Percentage indicating that these campus conditions occur “quite a bit” or “very much” at their school by grade level. (Students in suburban school sample.)

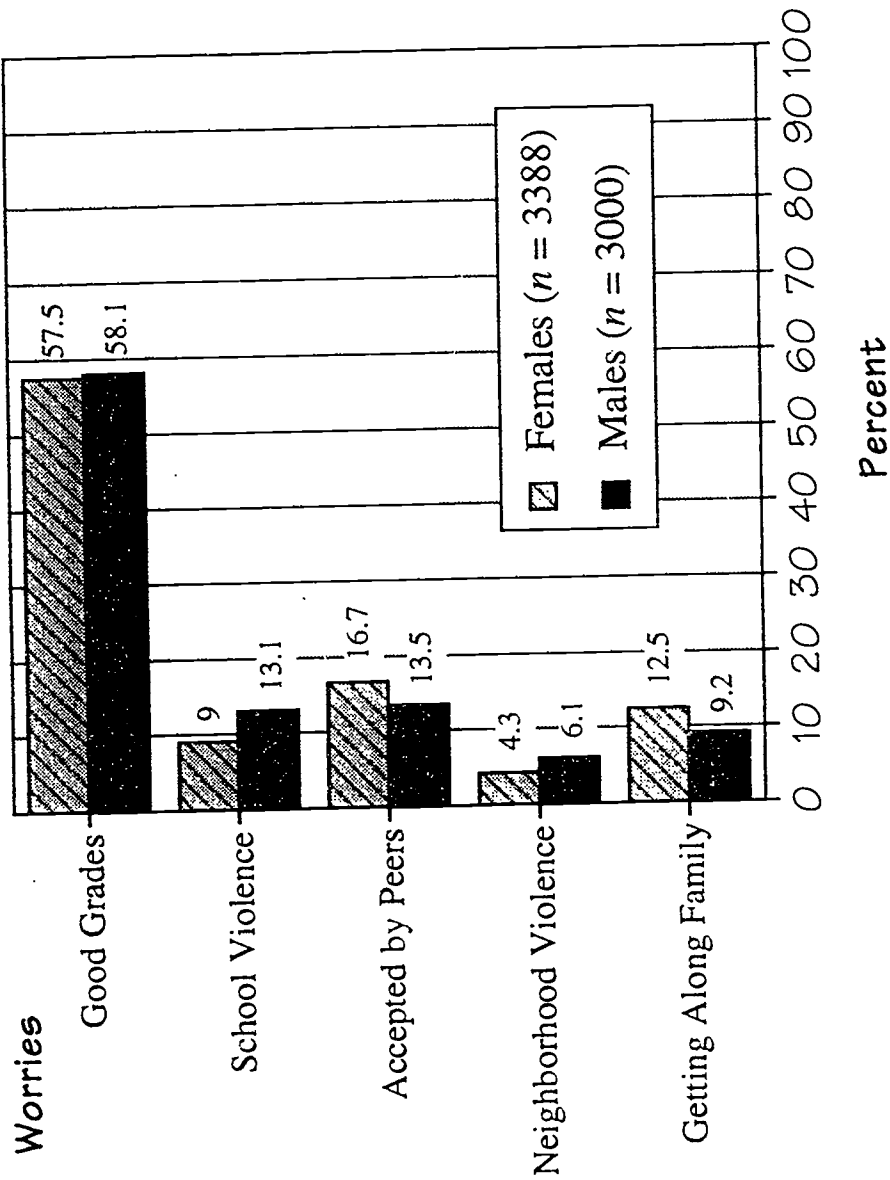
Figure 2. Percentage of males and females indicating what they are most worried about. (Students in suburban school sample.)

Figure 3. Percentage of students by grade level indicating what they are most worried about. (Students in suburban school sample.)

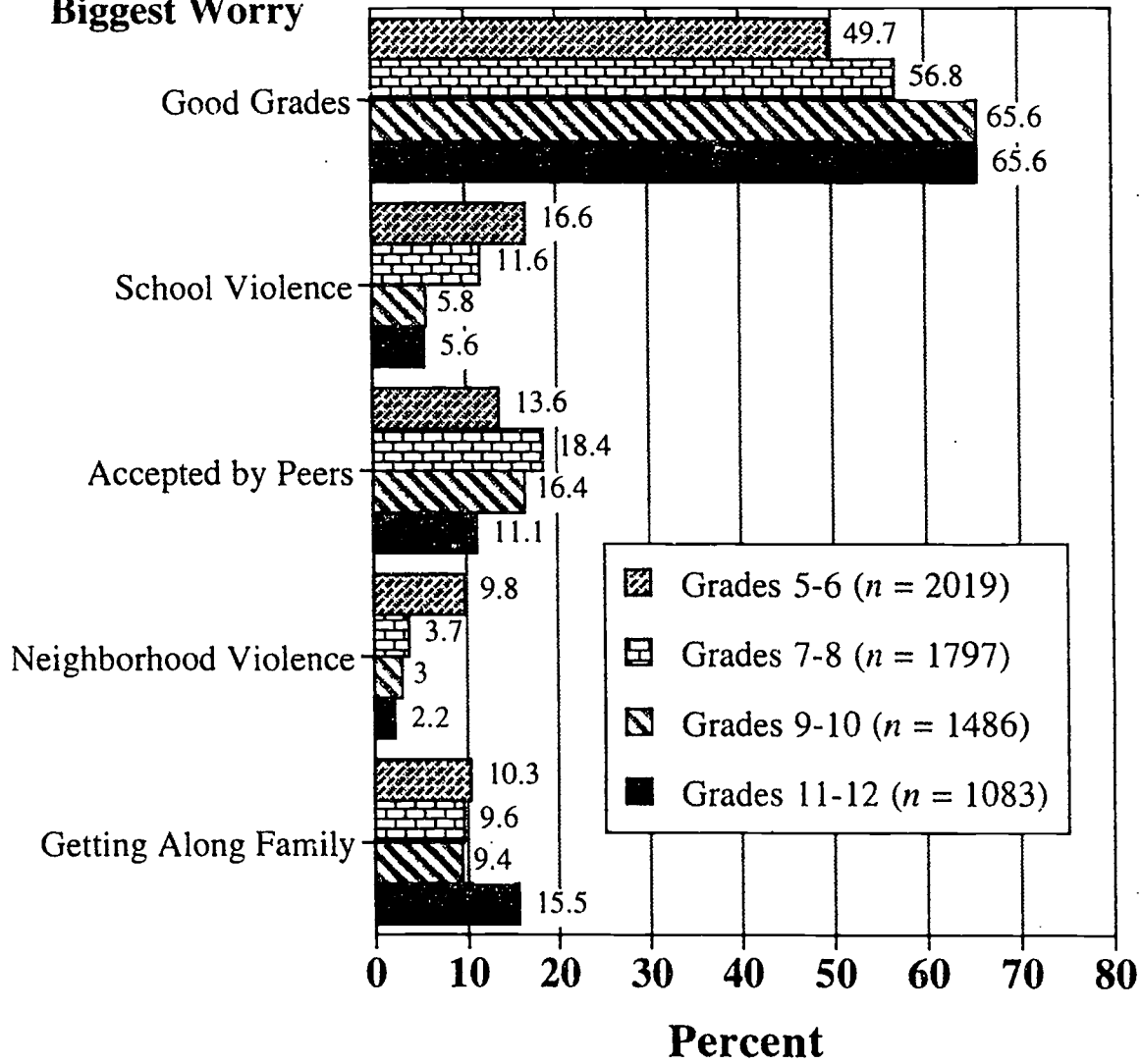
Figure 4. Percentage of students indicating that these incidents happened to them at school in the previous month. (Students in suburban school sample.)

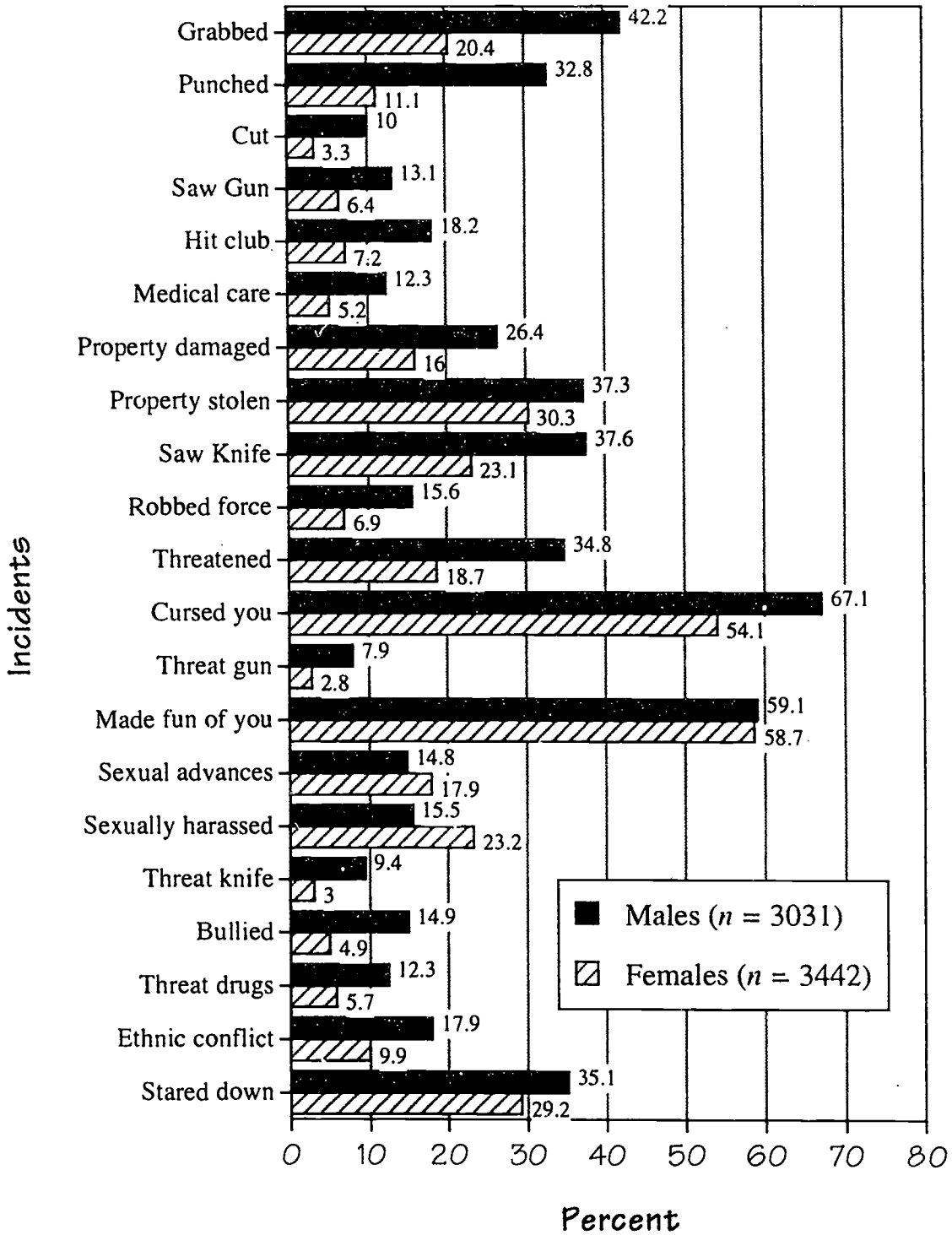
Figure 5. Percentage of males and females agreeing and disagreeing with selected school attachment and bonding items. (Students in suburban school sample.)

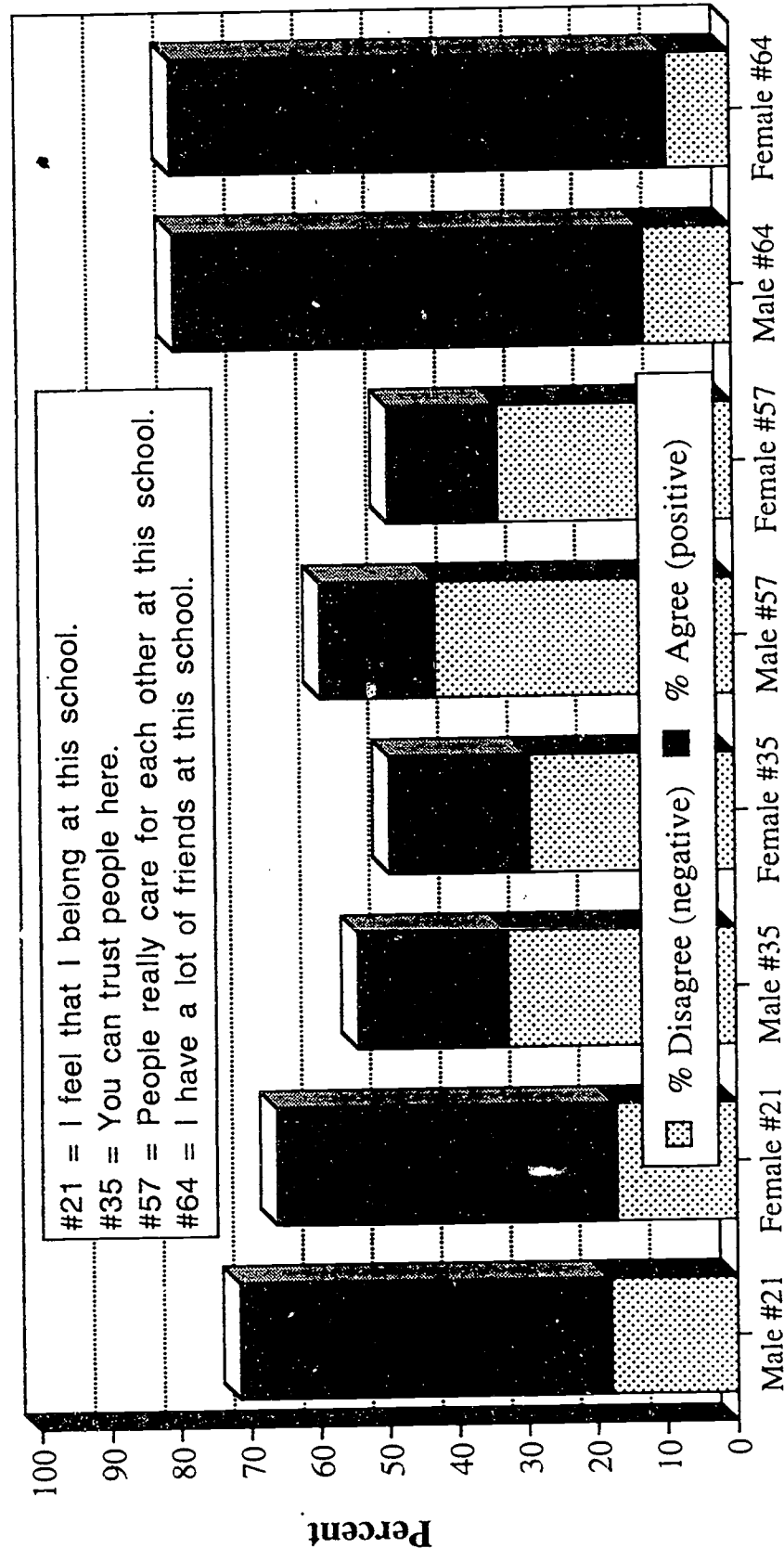




Biggest Worry







Group and School Connections and Attachment Items