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ABSTRACT

This report presents information on student strategies to avoid harm at school, based on responses from 6,504 students in grades 6 through 12 surveyed by the 1993 National Household Education Survey (NHES). Half of the students surveyed indicated that they did not use any strategy to avoid trouble at school, whereas the other half reported using a single strategy or a combination of strategies. Twenty percent of students said that they tried to stay in a group while at school, but did not report using any other strategy to avoid harm. Twenty-five percent of students reported using a combination of strategies, such as taking a special route to school, avoiding certain places in the school building or school grounds, staying away from school-related events, staying in a group while at school, or skipping school because they worried about harm. The report also found that senior high school students were less likely to report using harm avoidance strategies than elementary, middle, or junior high school students, and that white students were less likely to use such strategies than black or Hispanic students. A lower percentage of private school students than public school students reported the use of any strategy to avoid harm at school. A discussion of survey methodology and data reliability is included. (MDM)

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NATIONAL CENTER FOR EDUCATION STATISTICS

Statistics in Brief

October 1995

Student Strategies To Avoid Harm at School

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Ideally, schools should be havens where students and teachers can engage in activities related to learning free of concern about personal safety. In reality, today's schools are touched by the violence that is widespread in society. Students are exposed to crime or threats to personal safety at school, at school-related activities during the day, or on the way to or from school, and a small but unacceptable percentage of students are victimized at school.¹ In an effort to increase the safety of students at school, one of the National Education Goals states that, "By the year 2000, every school in America will be free of drugs and violence and will offer a disciplined environment conducive to learning," and measures to increase safety at school have been proposed in many schools and jurisdictions. However, until the conditions in our schools improve, students must take what steps they can to ensure their own safety.

This report presents information from a national survey of 6th- through 12th-grade students on student strategies to avoid harm at school. The data are from the 1993 National Household Education Survey (NHES:93) conducted by Westat for the National Center for Education Statistics. This report is based upon the responses of the 6,504 students in grades 6 through 12 who were surveyed.² Weights were applied to make the survey estimates applicable to the entire population of children in grades 6 through 12.³

Student Use of Strategies to Avoid Harm at School

The NHES:93 results suggest that unsafe conditions at school are not uncommon. About half of 6th- through 12th-grade students personally witnessed bullying, robbery, or physical assault at school, and about 1 out of 8 students reported being directly victimized at school.⁴ Threats or crime at school may motivate students to develop strategies to avoid harm. In the NHES:93, students were asked to report the types of strategies that they used to avoid trouble at school or on the way to or from school during the 1992-93 school year. Data were collected from January through April 1993. Specifically, students reported on whether they ever took a special route to get to school, avoided certain places in the school building, avoided places on the school grounds, stayed away from school-related events, stayed in a group while at school, or skipped school because they were worried someone might hurt or bother them.

One-half of 6th- through 12th-grade students indicated that they do not use any strategy to avoid trouble at school, the other half reported using a single strategy or a combination of strategies. Twenty percent of students said that they tried to stay in a group while at school, but did not report using any other strategy to avoid harm, and 5 percent resorted to a single strategy other than staying in a group (figure 1).

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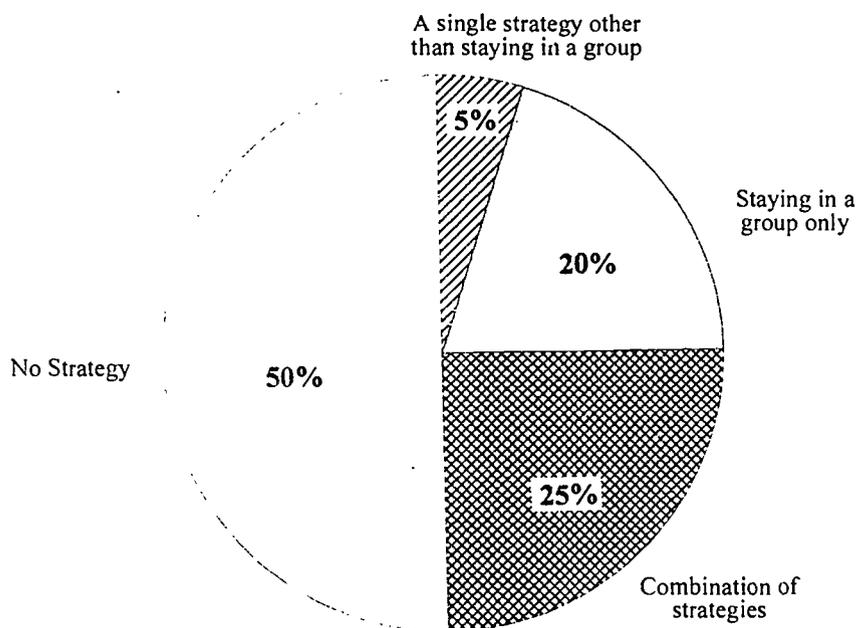
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Figure 1.—Sixth- through twelfth- graders' reports of the use of strategies to avoid trouble at school: 1993



Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, National Household Education Survey, 1993.

Use of Strategies to Avoid Harm at School, by School and Student Characteristics

School grade level, school type, and the racial/ethnic composition of the school relative to the student's own race/ethnicity were associated with students' reports of using some strategy to avoid difficulty at school. As might be expected, safety at school also had an impact.

Differences by school grade level. Senior high school students were less likely than students attending either elementary or middle or junior high schools to report using one or more of the strategies measured in this survey. Only 43 percent of senior high school students but 58 percent of 6th- through 12th-grade students attending elementary school and 60 percent attending middle or junior high schools said they used some strategy (table 1). It is worth noting that only 11 percent of students in grades 6 through 12 attended an elementary school. According to the definition used in this report, elementary and middle or junior high school students would, on average, be younger than high school students.⁹ Thus, age of student may be a confounding factor in the findings about school grade level.

Differences by school type. Resorting to a strategy to avoid harm or harassment at school is more common for students attending public schools than for those attending private schools, and there is a significant difference between students at public

schools to which they were assigned and those at public schools chosen by the family.

- More than half of students at public schools of choice reported strategies (57 percent) versus 50 percent of students at assigned public schools and only 31 percent of students at private schools (table 1).

Public schools chosen by the family, attended by 11 percent of 6th- through 12th-grade students, may be in areas that are perceived as less safe than other schools, which may account for some of the difference. The programs offered by magnet schools, for instance, may attract students and their parents despite requiring youths to travel to less familiar surroundings. This distance, in itself, would possibly warrant extra caution on the part of students.

Differences by student's race/ethnicity and school racial composition. White students were less likely than black students or Hispanic students to report use of any strategy to avoid harm at school.

- Forty-five percent of white students versus 60 percent of black students and 62 percent of Hispanic students said that they used one or more strategies (table 1).

When the racial composition of the school is taken into account for white and black students, it was white students attending schools in which most of the other students were also white who were less

likely to report the use of a strategy to avoid harm at school as compared to black students in schools of any racial composition.

Differences by school safety. As would be expected, any encounter with victimization at school increases the likelihood that students will use some strategy to try to avoid harm. Students who know that incidents of bullying, robbery, or physical assault have taken place at their schools or students who have witnessed these events were more likely to report using one or more strategies to avoid such incidents. About three-quarters of students who either worry about being victimized at school or who have been victimized reported using one or more strategies to avoid harm (table 1).

Use of Specific Strategies to Avoid Harm at School by School and Student Characteristics

Whether a single strategy or part of a combination of ways to increase safety at school, staying in a group was the most commonly reported, by 41 percent of students (table 2). Twenty percent of students opted to stay away from certain places in the school building. Relatively few students (5 percent) chose to take a special route to get to school or to skip school (7 percent). Choice of specific strategy varied by some school and student characteristics.

Differences by school grade level. The use of specific kinds of strategies to avoid harm was related to school grade level.

- One-quarter of middle or junior high school children reported that they deliberately stay away from certain places in the school compared with 17 percent of high school students who used this strategy (table 2).
- Both elementary and middle or junior high school students were more likely to stay away from places on school grounds, take a special route to get to school, and stay in a group than were senior high school students.

Differences by school type. The reports of public school students and private school students were also distinct regarding specific avoidance strategies. For example:

- Twenty-one percent of students at assigned public schools and 24 percent of students at chosen public schools reported deliberately staying away from certain places in school compared to 5 percent of private school students (table 2).

In fact, higher percentages of students at both assigned and chosen public schools than at private schools reported using all types of avoidance strategies.

Differences by student's race/ethnicity and school racial composition. While the NHES:93 found that the incidence and types of victimization varied little by race/ethnicity and school racial composition, some strategies used by students to avoid trouble were different for black and white students in schools of various racial compositions. To illustrate:

- Nine percent of black students in mostly black schools and 10 percent of black students in racially mixed schools took a special route to get to school, nearly 5 times the percentage of white children in mostly white schools that reported this strategy (table 2).
- Black students in mostly black schools and black students in racially mixed schools were also more likely to stay away from certain places in the school than were white students in mostly white schools.
- Eight percent of white students in mostly white schools stayed away from certain places on the school grounds compared to 26 percent of black students in mostly black schools and 19 percent of black students in mostly nonblack schools.

Student choice of specific strategy by race/ethnicity also revealed some significant differences. For example:

- Only 3 percent of white students took a special route to get to school versus 8 percent of black students and 10 percent of Hispanic students (table 2).
- While 10 percent of black students and 11 percent of Hispanic students reported they sometimes stayed home from school because they worried about harm, 5 percent of white students said they did so.

Black and Hispanic students were also more likely than white students to stay away from certain places in the school, to stay away from places on the school grounds, and to stay away from school-related events.

Summary

Wary of potential danger, approximately half of 6th- through 12th-grade students employ strategies to help them avoid harm, most commonly staying in a group while at school or avoiding certain places in the school. White students attending schools in which most of the students are white were less likely to report using a strategy than were black students, regardless of the racial composition of their schools. There is a striking difference in reported use of strategies between students at private schools and students at public schools, with a lower percentage

of private school students than public school students reporting the use of any strategy to avoid harm at school. Students who must think about avoiding harm at school are diverting energy that should be expended on learning. Improving students' safety at school will enable American youth to redirect their concerns to school work and student activities.

Survey Methodology and Data Reliability

The 1993 National Household Education Survey (NHES:93) is a telephone survey conducted by Westat for the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). Data collection took place from January through April of 1993. The sample is nationally representative of all civilian, noninstitutionalized persons in the 50 states and the District of Columbia. This sample was selected using random digit dialing (RDD) methods, and the data were collected using computer assisted telephone interviewing (CATI) technology.

The School Safety and Discipline (SS&D) component of the NHES:93, which is the basis of this report, included a sample of students in grades 3 through 12. Two instruments were used to collect data on the school experiences of these students. A household Screener, administered to an adult member of the household, was used to determine whether any children of the appropriate ages lived in the household, to collect information on each household member, and to identify the appropriate parent/guardian respondent. If one or two eligible children resided in the household, interviews were conducted about each child. If more than two eligible children resided in the household, two children were randomly sampled as interview subjects. For households with children who were sampled for the survey, SS&D interviews were conducted with the parent/guardian most knowledgeable about the care and education of each child. If an eligible youth resided in a household in which no adult was acting in a caretaking capacity for him or her, then that "emancipated" youth responded to the interview. A sample of youth in grades 6 through 12 was also interviewed following the completion of the parent interview about the child. This report was based on the responses of students in grades 6 through 12.

Response Rates

For the NHES:93 survey, Screeners were completed with 63,844 households, of which 12,829 contained at least one child sampled for the SS&D component. The response rate for the Screener was 82 percent. The completion rate for the SS&D interview with parents of 6th- through 12th-grade students, or the

percentage of interviews conducted with parents for sampled children in that grade range, was 90 percent, and the completion rate for the youth in grades 6 through 12 who were sampled was 83 percent. Thus, the overall response rate for the SS&D interview with parents of students in grades 6 through 12 was 74 percent (the product of the Screener response rate and the SS&D completion rate). For youth, the overall response rate was 68 percent. For the NHES:93, item nonresponse (the failure to complete some items in an otherwise completed interview) was very low. The item nonresponse rates for variables in this report are generally less than 2 percent for parents and 1 percent for youth. Items with missing data were imputed using a hot-deck procedure. As a result, no missing values remain.

Data Reliability

Estimates produced using data from the NHES:93 are subject to two types of error, sampling and nonsampling errors. Nonsampling errors are errors made in the collection and processing of data. Sampling errors occur because the data are collected from a sample rather than a census of the population.

Nonsampling errors. Nonsampling error is the term used to describe variations in the estimates that may be caused by population coverage limitations and data collection, processing, and reporting procedures. The sources of nonsampling errors are typically problems like unit and item nonresponse, the differences in respondents' interpretations of the meaning of the questions, response differences related to the particular time the survey was conducted, and mistakes in data preparation.

In general, it is difficult to identify and estimate either the amount of nonsampling error or the bias caused by this error. In the NHES:93 survey, efforts were made to prevent such errors from occurring and to compensate for them where possible. For instance, during the survey design phase, focus groups and cognitive laboratory interviews were conducted for the purpose of assessing respondent knowledge of the topics, comprehension of questions and terms, and the sensitivity of items. The design phase also entailed over 500 staff hours of CATI instrument testing and a pretest in which over 275 interviews were conducted.

An important nonsampling error for a telephone survey is the failure to include persons who do not live in households with telephones. About 92 percent of all students in grades 3 through 12 live in households with telephones. Estimation procedures were used to help reduce the bias in the estimates associated with children who do not live in telephone households.

Sampling errors. The sample of telephone households selected for the NHES:93 is just one of many possible samples that could have been selected. Therefore, estimates produced from the NHES:93 sample may differ from estimates that would have been produced from other samples. This type of variability is called sampling error because it arises from using a sample of household with telephones, rather than all households with telephones.

The standard error is a measure of the variability due to sampling when estimating a statistic; standard errors for estimates presented in this report were computed using a jackknife replication method. Standard errors can be used as a measure of the precision expected from a particular sample. The probability that a complete census count would differ from the sample estimate by less than one standard error is about 68 percent. The chance that the difference would be less than 1.65 standard errors is about 90 percent; and that the difference would be less than 1.96 standard errors, about 95 percent.

Standard errors for all of the estimates are presented in the tables. These standard errors can be used to produce confidence intervals. For example, an estimated 5 percent of students reported that they took a special route to get to school. This figure has an estimated standard error of .5. Therefore, the estimated 95 percent confidence interval for this statistic is approximately 4 to 6 percent.

Statistical tests. The tests of significance used in this analysis are based on Student's *t* statistics. As the number of comparisons at the same significance level increases, it becomes more likely that at least one of the estimated differences will be significant merely by chance, that is, it will be erroneously identified as different from zero. Even when there is no statistical difference between the means or percentages being compared, there is a 5 percent chance of getting a significant *t* value of 1.96 from sampling error alone. As the number of comparisons increases, the chance of making this type of error also increases.

A Bonferroni adjustment was used to correct significance tests for multiple comparisons. This

method adjusts the significance level for the total number of comparisons made with a particular classification variable. All the differences cited in this report are significant at the .05 level of significance after a Bonferroni adjustment.

Acknowledgments

The authors wish to thank the following people who reviewed this report and provided helpful critique and suggestions: Marilyn McMillen of the Elementary and Secondary Education Statistics Division of NCES; Mike Cohen of the Statistical Standards and Methodology Division of NCES; John Ralph of the Data Development Division of NCES; Oliver Moles, OERI; Bruce Taylor, Bureau of Justice Statistics; and Edward D. Jonas, Jr., Atlanta Board of Education.

Endnotes

¹Nolin, M.J., Davies, E., and Chandler, K. *Student Victimization at School* (forthcoming).

²A total of 12,690 parents of students in grades 3 through 12 and 6,504 students in grades 6 through 12 were interviewed in the NHES:93.

³The survey data were weighted to the entire U.S. population of youth in grades 6 through 12, not only those youth living in households with telephones.

⁴Nolin, M.J., Davies, E., and Chandler, K. *Student Victimization at School* (forthcoming).

⁵Elementary schools were defined as having a lowest grade of 3 or less and a highest grade of 8 or less. Middle or junior high school schools were defined as having a lowest and a highest grade of 4 through 9. Senior high schools were defined as having a lowest grade of 7 through 12 and a highest grade of 10 through 12. Schools that did not precisely meet these qualifications were classified as "combined."

⁶For additional information on telephone coverage issues and estimation procedures to correct for coverage biases see J. M. Brick and J. Burke, Telephone Coverage Bias of 14- to 21-year-olds and 3- to 5-year-olds. U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, report number NCES 92-101.

Table 1.— Percentage of students reporting the use of any strategy to avoid harm at school,¹ by school and student characteristics: 1993

Characteristic	Number of students in grades 6 through 12 (thousands)	Some strategy or combination of strategies used		No strategy used	
		Percent	s.e.	Percent	s.e.
Total.....	24,060	50	0.8	50	0.8
School grade level ²					
Elementary school.....	2,663	58	3.1	42	3.1
Middle or junior high school.....	7,418	60	1.5	40	1.5
Senior high school ¹	1,539	43	1.2	57	1.2
Combined.....	2,440	40	5.3	60	5.3
School type ³					
Public, assigned.....	19,507	50	0.9	50	0.9
Public, chosen.....	2,683	57	2.1	43	2.1
Private.....	1,870	31	2.0	69	2.0
School size ⁴					
Under 300.....	2,632	46	2.8	54	2.8
300 - 599.....	7,820	50	1.6	50	1.6
600 - 999.....	6,176	50	1.8	50	1.8
1,000 or more.....	7,433	50	1.4	50	1.4
Student's race/ethnicity and school racial composition ⁵					
White in mostly white school.....	9,598	43	1.8	57	1.8
White in racially mixed school.....	6,449	48	1.6	52	1.6
White in mostly nonwhite school.....	789	46	4.4	54	4.4
Black in mostly black school.....	1,055	59	2.9	41	2.9
Black in racially mixed school.....	1,958	61	4.2	39	4.2
Black in mostly nonblack school.....	814	60	4.0	40	4.0
Other race/ethnicity-school combination.....	3,399	61	2.1	39	2.1
Student's race/ethnicity					
White, non-Hispanic.....	16,835	45	1.2	55	1.2
Black, non-Hispanic.....	3,826	60	2.4	40	2.4
Hispanic.....	2,636	62	2.2	38	2.2
Other races.....	762	56	7.3	44	7.3
Sex					
Male.....	12,040	49	1.0	51	1.0
Female.....	12,020	50	1.1	50	1.1
Knows of incidents					
Yes.....	17,002	56	1.1	44	1.1
No.....	7,058	35	2.2	65	2.2
Witnessed incidents					
Yes.....	13,425	57	0.9	43	0.9
No.....	10,636	40	1.1	60	1.1
Worried about being victimized					
Yes.....	6,045	78	1.2	22	1.2
No.....	18,015	40	0.8	60	0.8
Victimized					
Yes.....	2,784	74	2.2	26	2.2
No.....	21,276	47	0.8	53	0.8

¹Includes school activities during the day and on the way to or from school.

²Schools were classified according to the lowest and highest grades at the school. Schools in which the lowest grade was 3 or less and the highest grade was 8 or less were classified as elementary. Middle or junior high schools were those that had a low grade of 4 through 9 and a high grade of 4 through 9. Senior high schools had a low grade of 7 through 12 and a high grade of 10 through 12. Schools that did not precisely meet these qualifications were classified as "combined."

³School type was defined by the parents of the students who were interviewed as an assigned public school, a public school that was chosen by the family, or a private school.

⁴School size was determined by the estimate of parents of students who were asked to choose from among the following four categories: under 300, 300 to 599, 600 to 999, or 1,000 or more. Parents who were only able to estimate the number of students in their child's grade were allowed to do so, and that answer was converted to size of school based upon the number of grades in the school.

⁵School racial composition was measured by parent reports. Schools were characterized as having more than 75 percent of students in the same racial/ethnic group as the child, between 25 and 75 percent, or less than 25 percent in the same racial/ethnic group.

NOTE: s.e. is standard error. Number of students may not add to totals due to rounding.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, National Household Education Survey, 1993.

Table 2.— Percentage of students reporting specific strategies to avoid harm at school,¹ by school and student characteristics: 1993

Characteristic	Number of students in grades 6 through 12 (thousands)	Strategies											
		Take special route to get to school		Stay away from certain places in the school		Stay away from places on school grounds		Stay away from school-related events		Stay in a group at school		Stay home sometimes	
		Percent	s.e.	Percent	s.e.	Percent	s.e.	Percent	s.e.	Percent	s.e.	Percent	s.e.
Total	24,060	5	0.5	20	0.6	14	0.6	8	0.6	41	0.9	7	0.5
School grade level ²													
Elementary school	2,663	7	1.4	21	4.2	22	2.6	8	1.7	50	3.8	8	1.3
Middle or junior high school	7,418	7	0.8	25	1.4	18	2.5	9	0.7	49	1.7	8	0.9
Senior high school	11,539	3	0.4	17	0.8	10	0.5	7	0.6	36	1.0	6	0.5
Combined	2,440	4	1.1	15	2.5	10	1.8	8	1.7	33	4.3	6	1.4
School type ³													
Public, assigned	19,507	5	0.5	21	1.0	14	0.8	8	0.6	42	0.7	7	0.6
Public, chosen	2,683	6	1.1	24	3.2	18	2.6	10	1.7	45	4.9	7	1.3
Private	1,870	2	0.7	5	0.8	4	0.9	3	1.0	27	2.0	2	0.5
School size ⁴													
Under 300	2,632	3	0.9	15	4.0	12	2.4	6	1.6	37	3.3	6	1.2
300 - 599	7,820	5	0.8	20	1.8	16	1.7	8	1.0	42	1.1	6	0.8
600 - 999	6,176	5	0.7	21	1.0	13	1.0	8	0.7	42	1.5	8	0.9
1,000 or more	7,433	4	0.5	21	1.2	13	0.8	8	0.8	41	1.2	8	0.6
Student's race/ethnicity and school racial composition ⁵													
White in mostly white school	9,598	2	0.4	13	1.0	8	0.8	6	0.7	37	1.5	4	0.5
White in racially mixed school	6,449	4	0.6	21	1.9	12	1.0	6	0.7	40	2.2	6	0.7
White in mostly nonwhite school	789	3	1.1	19	3.0	13	2.8	9	2.6	38	3.9	10	2.6
Black in mostly black school	1,055	9	2.1	31	3.3	26	3.6	12	2.5	42	3.3	8	1.9
Black in racially mixed school	1,958	10	2.2	32	4.7	24	8.6	11	2.4	48	6.0	10	2.2
Black in mostly nonblack school	814	5	1.8	23	3.9	19	3.0	9	2.2	47	3.6	13	3.4
Other race/ethnicity-school combination	3,399	8	1.1	27	1.8	24	1.6	13	1.3	49	2.0	11	1.2
Student's race/ethnicity													
White, non-Hispanic	16,835	3	0.4	16	0.7	10	0.7	6	0.5	38	1.6	5	0.4
Black, non-Hispanic	3,826	8	1.4	30	3.0	24	4.3	11	1.5	46	3.5	10	1.6
Hispanic	2,636	10	1.2	28	1.9	25	1.9	13	1.4	50	2.6	11	1.3
Other races	762	5	1.6	26	4.1	21	3.3	13	2.3	46	5.7	11	2.8
Sex													
Male	12,040	5	0.6	19	1.3	14	1.5	8	0.8	40	1.0	6	0.6
Female	12,020	4	0.6	21	0.9	13	0.9	7	0.6	42	1.5	8	0.7

¹Includes school activities during the day and on the way to or from school.

²Schools were classified according to the lowest and highest grades at the school. Schools in which the lowest grade was 3 or less and the highest grade was 8 or less were classified as elementary. Middle or junior high schools were those that had a low grade of 4 through 9 and a high grade of 4 through 9. Senior high school had a low grade of 7 through 12 and a high grade of 10 through 12. Schools that did not precisely meet these qualifications were classified as "combined."

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⁵School racial composition was measured by parent reports. Schools were characterized as having more than 75 percent of students in the same racial/ethnic group as the child, between 25 and 75 percent, or less than 25 percent in the same racial/ethnic group.

NOTE: s.e. is standard error. Number of students may not add to totals due to rounding.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, National Household Education Survey, 1993.