Crime, Violence, Discipline, and Safety in U.S. Public Schools in 2019-20

Findings From the School Survey on Crime and Safety

First Look–Summary Report

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Introduction

Using data from the School Survey on Crime and Safety (SSOCS), this report presents findings both on crime and violence in U.S. public schools and on the practices and programs schools have used to promote school safety. SSOCS is managed and funded by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). NCES is part of the U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences. The study has been fielded eight times, most recently during the 2019-20 school year. The 2019-20 SSOCS (SSOCS:2020) was funded in part by the Department's Office of Safe and Healthy Students.

SSOCS collects data from public school principals about violent and nonviolent crimes in their schools. The survey also collects data on school security measures, school security staff, mental health services, parent and community involvement at school, and staff training. SSOCS data can be used to study how violent incidents in schools relate to the programs and practices that schools have in place to prevent crime.

Data collection began in February 2020 and was conducted mostly using an online survey instrument. In March 2020, many schools began closing their physical buildings due to the coronavirus pandemic. This affected data collection activities. Also, the change to virtual schooling and the adjusted school year may have impacted the data collected by SSOCS. Due to the pandemic, the survey also had an extended data collection window compared with earlier SSOCS collections. Data collection for SSOCS:2020 ended in October 2020. Readers should use caution when comparing SSOCS:2020 estimates with those from earlier years.

The national sample for SSOCS:2020 was made up of 4,800 U.S. public schools.[1] Of these schools, 2,370 elementary, middle, high/secondary, and combined/other schools[2] responded. The weighted response rate is 54 percent. Since the response rate was less than 85 percent, a unit nonresponse bias analysis was performed. The results showed that nonresponding schools were significantly different from responding schools. However, the results also showed that weighting adjustments removed most of the observed nonresponse bias. Weighting should also reduce

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[1] The SSOCS sample frame includes regular public schools, public charter schools, and schools with partial or total magnet programs. The SSOCS sample frame excludes private schools, special education schools, vocational schools, alternative schools, virtual schools, newly closed schools, home schools, ungraded schools, schools with a highest grade of kindergarten or lower, Department of Defense schools, schools sponsored by the Bureau of Indian Education, and schools in the U.S. outlying areas and Puerto Rico.

[2] *Elementary* schools are defined as schools that enroll students in more of grades K through 4 than in higher grades. *Middle* schools are defined as schools that enroll students in more of grades 5 through 8 than in higher or lower grades. *High/secondary* schools are defined as schools that enroll students in more of grades 9 through 12 than in lower grades. *Combined/other* schools include all other combinations of grades, including K-12 schools. School level categories in SSOCS:2020 differ from those in previous survey administrations; caution should be exercised when comparing estimates by level over time. For more information, see the Caution Concerning Changes in Variables and Estimates section of Appendix C: Methodology and Technical Notes.

nonresponse bias in the survey estimates, although some bias may remain. For more information about the response rates and the nonresponse bias analysis, see Appendix C: Methodology and Technical Notes.

The purpose of this report is to introduce the data by presenting selected descriptive information from SSOCS:2020. The tables in the report contain totals and percentages, which have been weighted to represent U.S. public schools. Tables of standard errors are provided in Appendix A. The report also includes selected findings and figures. Together, the tables, findings, and figures show the range of data available from the survey rather than a full review of all observed differences. A description of the variables presented in the tables is provided in Appendix B.

Comparisons made in the report were tested to make sure differences accounted for margins of error due to sampling. Student's *t* tests were used for testing with a .05 significance threshold. Adjustments for multiple comparisons were not made. Many of the variables examined are related to one another, and complex interactions and relationships have not been explored. For information about how to compare estimates in the tables, see the Statistical Tests section of Appendix C.

More information about the SSOCS survey, publications, and data products can be found at https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/ssocs.

For readers interested in appendixes with tables of estimates, definitions of terms used in the findings and tables, and additional information about the survey from which the findings are drawn, please see the "View full report" link at https://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2022029.

Selected Findings: School Year 2019-20

- During the 2019-20 school year, about 939,000 violent incidents and 487,000 nonviolent incidents occurred in U.S. public schools.[3,4] Seventy percent of schools reported having at least one violent incident, and 62 percent reported having at least one nonviolent incident (table 1) (figure 1).
- Sixty percent of schools reported at least one physical attack or fight without a weapon at school. Nine percent of schools reported such an attack with a weapon (table 2).
- Schools in towns reported at least one incident of theft at school (38 percent) at higher rates than suburban (31 percent) and rural schools (26 percent). This rate was also higher in city schools (35 percent) than in rural schools (table 3).
- Among schools with 1,000 or more students, 48 percent reported having at least one incident of distribution, possession, or use of alcohol at school. Smaller schools reported this incident at lower rates (6 to 14 percent) (table 4).
- Bullying at school at least once a week was reported at a higher rate for middle schools (25 percent) than for high/secondary schools (16 percent) or elementary schools (11 percent). Cyberbullying at school or away from school at least once a week was reported by 33 percent of middle schools and 29 percent of high/secondary schools. This compared to 7 percent of elementary schools (table 5).
- Serious disciplinary actions include out-of-school suspensions of 5 or more days. They also include removals with no services for the remainder of the school year and transfers to alternative schools. Some 35 percent of schools reported taking at least one such action for specific offenses.[5] Much higher rates of use were reported by high/secondary schools (74 percent) and middle schools (61 percent) than for elementary schools (16 percent) (table 6).
- Sixty-four percent of all public schools reported having a threat assessment[6] team. These teams were more common in suburban (71 percent) and city (67 percent) schools than in town (57 percent) and rural schools (55 percent) (table 7).

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[3] Violent incidents include rape or attempted rape, sexual assault other than rape, robbery (with or without a weapon), physical attack or fight (with or without a weapon), and threat of physical attack (with or without a weapon). Nonviolent incidents include theft; possession of a firearm or explosive device; possession of a knife or sharp object; distribution, possession, or use of illegal drugs or alcohol; vandalism; and inappropriate distribution, possession, or use of prescription drugs.

[4] The 95 percent confidence interval for "violent incidents" ranges from 840,700 to 1,036,300. The 95 percent confidence interval for "nonviolent incidents" ranges from 456,700 to 517,300.

[5] Respondents were asked to report on disciplinary actions for five specific offenses: use or possession of a firearm or explosive device; use or possession of a weapon other than a firearm or explosive device; distribution, possession, or use of illegal drugs; distribution, possession, or use of alcohol; and physical attacks or fights.

[6] "Threat assessment" was defined as a formalized process of identifying, assessing, and managing students who may pose a threat of targeted violence in schools.

- During the 2019-20 school year, 52 percent of schools had a written plan for procedures in the event of a pandemic disease. Schools had other types of plans as well. Some of the most commonly reported plans were for natural disasters (96 percent), active shooters (96 percent), and bomb threats or incidents (93 percent) (table 8) (figure 2).
- Among schools where at least half of the students were minorities, 69 percent reported involving students in restorative practices.[7] Rates were lower at schools with lower minority enrollments (ranging from 40 to 58 percent) (table 9).
- Schools were asked whether certain factors limited their efforts to reduce or prevent crime "in a major way." The two factors reported most often were inadequate funding and a lack of, or inadequate, alternative placements or programs for disruptive students. Roughly 36 percent reported each issue. Schools were also asked about factors that limited their efforts to provide mental health services to students. Most (54 percent) reported inadequate funding, and 40 percent reported lack of access to licensed mental health professionals[8] (table 10).
- About 51 percent of traditional public schools had a School Resource Officer[9] present at school at least once a week. This was about twice the rate (25 percent) of charter schools (table 11).
- Among schools with 1,000 or more students, 83 percent had at least one sworn law enforcement officer who routinely carried a firearm. Schools with fewer students reported this situation at lower rates (33 to 56 percent) (table 12) (figure 3).
- During the 2019-20 school year, 55 percent of schools provided diagnostic mental health assessments to evaluate students for mental health disorders. Forty-two percent of schools provided treatment to students for mental health disorders (table 13).

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[7] "Restorative practices" was defined as a formal mediation process led by a facilitator that brings affected parties of a problem together to explore what happened, reflect on their roles, find a solution, and ultimately restore harmony to individual relationships and the larger community. An example was "peace or conflict circles."

[8] Licensed mental health professionals may include psychiatrists, psychologists, psychiatric or mental health nurse practitioners, psychiatric or mental health nurses, clinical social workers, and professional counselors.

[9] "School Resource Officers" were defined as career sworn law enforcement officers with arrest authority, who have specialized training and are assigned to work in collaboration with school organizations.