

## National and State School Crime Trends

### Introduction

While crime steadily declined during the previous decade, the issue of crime and violence in the schools has remained on the forefront of both national and state legislative and public policy agendas. The tragedies at Paducah and Columbine, as well as other school-related incidents of mass violence, have triggered panic across the nation with public school administrators, parents and members of the law enforcement community gathering together to propose immediate and lasting solutions to violence in the classroom.

This SystemStats issue will critically examine trends in school-related crimes over the course of the past decade. Specifically, national and state trends will be presented with an emphasis on assessing how the nature and extent of school crime has changed since the beginning of the decade. Data from the Federal Bureau of Justice Statistics, the National Center for Education Statistics, the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction and the State's Center for the Prevention of School Violence will be presented in an effort to delineate these trends and to identify salient concerns within the area of school-related crime and violence.



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### National Trends

Bastian and Taylor (1991) analyzed data from the 1989 School Crime Supplement (SCS) of the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS). Their findings are based upon a nationally representative sample of more than 10,000 students who were interviewed between January and June of 1989. Students were asked to report on their perceptions of crime in the schools, the safety and security of the school environment, victimization incidents and gang activity in their respective schools. The most salient findings of this national study are highlighted below.

- Nine percent of the students were victims of crime during this period with 2 percent reporting that they were the victims of one or more violent crimes.
- Male and female students were equally likely to experience a victimization at school.
- Students of different races experienced about the same amount of violent or property victimization in or near their schools.
- Public school students were more likely to be crime victims compared to private school students.
- Ninth graders were more likely to become crime victims than students in other grades.
- 15.3 percent of the students reported that gangs were present in their schools.
- Of those students with gangs in the schools, 12 percent reported weekly gang fights.

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- 16 percent of those surveyed reported that another student had attacked or threatened a teacher.
- 6 percent of the students indicated that they avoided certain places at school, such as the restroom, for fear of being attacked.
- Younger students were more fearful of being attacked with this fear being twice as high among 12 year olds versus 18 year olds.
- Students in large central cities were more likely to carry weapons for self-protection when compared to students in suburban schools.

The passage of the 1994 Safe and Drug-Free Schools and Communities Act by Congress mandated that the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) begin collecting data on the frequency, seriousness and incidence of violence in the nation's schools. A collaborative study between this agency and the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) released in March of 1998 compared the original 1989 NCVS school crime supplement to the 1995 NCVS school crime supplement. Chandler, Chapman, Rand and Taylor (1998) reported the following trend information based upon their comparative analysis of these two data sets.

- No significant changes occurred in the number of students reporting any school victimization experiences between 1989 and 1995.
- However, the number of students who experienced violent victimizations grew from 1989 to 1995.
- Students who reported that drugs were readily available in their respective schools were more likely to become victims in both 1989 and 1995.
- The percent of students reporting gangs in the schools nearly doubled between 1989 (15.3 %) and 1995 (28.4%).

- While the percent of male students who reported being the victim of a violent attack was the same for 1989 and 1995 the percentage of female students who reported being the victim of violent attacks in 1995 grew over the 1989 percentage.
- As a general rule the authors note that more problems were reported by students in 1995 than by students in 1989, with criminal activity and victimization incidents being more prevalent when other factors, such as gangs, drugs and guns, co-existed in the school environment.

The National Center for Education Statistics (1997) surveyed a nationally representative sample of 1,234 public elementary, middle and secondary school principals as part of its Principal/School Disciplinary Survey on School Violence. Survey participants were asked about the incidence of crime and violence in their schools during the 1996-1997 school year, their perceptions of disciplinary issues, the types of disciplinary actions they utilized and the nature of security measures and violence prevention programs they employed within their respective schools. The NCES report included these salient key findings.

- More than half (57%) of the principals reported that one or more criminal acts occurred in their schools during the 1996-1997 school year.
- Ten percent of the public schools experienced one or more serious violent crimes.
- 190,000 physical attacks or fights, without a weapon, were reported.
- 116,000 larceny-thefts were reported with 98,000 acts of vandalism occurring.
- 4,000 rapes or sexual assaults, 7,000 robberies and 11,000 fights with weapons were reported by the responding principals.

*Over the period 1994-1998 there were 83 crimes per 1,000 teachers per year, including theft and violent crimes.*

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- Acts of violence occurred in 77 percent of the high schools, 74 percent of the middle schools and 45 percent of the elementary schools.
- Schools with other disciplinary problems were substantially more likely to experience one or more crimes of violence.
- 84 percent of the principals' schools had low levels of security with no guards, cameras, metal detectors or only a few, or no, security-restricted areas.
- However, 78 percent of the schools had violence prevention or reduction programs.
- However, some victimization patterns remained the same. Between 1993 and 1997, the percentage of students reporting that they were threatened or injured with a weapon remained at 7 percent. The percentage of students who reported that they engaged in a physical fight stayed at 15 percent.
- As school crime and victimization have recently declined, the perceptions of security and safety among students has directly increased. A lower percentage of students report that they avoid unsafe places in their schools (9 percent in 1995 versus 5 percent in 1999).

The latest report on school crime, another joint study conducted by the NCES and BJS, was released in October of 2000 and includes data from as recently as 1999. In addition to analyzing the NCVS School Crime Supplement, the authors performed analyses using data on the number of violent deaths in the schools from the United States Department of Education and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The authors' (Kaufman, Chen, Choy, Ruddy, Miller, Fleury, Chandler, Rand, Klaus and Planty, 2000) key findings are delineated below.

- The gang presence in the schools has declined from 29 percent of the students acknowledging this in 1995 to 15 percent reporting gangs in their schools last year.
- Over the period of 1994-1998, 1,755,000 nonfatal crimes were perpetrated against American teachers. This included 1,087,000 thefts and 668,000 violent crimes. This equates to 83 crimes per 1,000 teachers per year.
- Between 1993 and 1997, the percentage of students who reported carrying a weapon to school declined from 12 percent to 9 percent.
- In 1998, students in the age range of 12-18 were the victims of more than 2.7 million total school crimes. This includes 253,000 serious acts of violence and 60 confirmed school associated violent deaths. Of these 60 deaths, 47 were homicides.
- The total victimization rate declined between 1993 and 1998.
- Between 1995 and 1999, the percentage of all students who reported being victimized at school dropped from 10 percent to 8 percent.
- During the same period, victimization dropped from 11 percent to 8 percent for 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> graders, and declined from 12 percent to 9 percent among 9<sup>th</sup> graders.
- Another recently released report, *2000 Annual Report on School Safety*, compiled by the United States Department of Education and the United States Department of Justice (2000), suggests that the prevalence of school crime has declined over the last half of the previous decade. Key findings in this report are listed below.
- The rate of nonfatal crimes declined from 144, per 1,000 students, in 1992 to 101 per 1,000 students in 1998.
- The rate at which students were the victims of larceny-theft declined from 95 per 1,000 students in 1992, to 58, per 1,000 students, in 1998.

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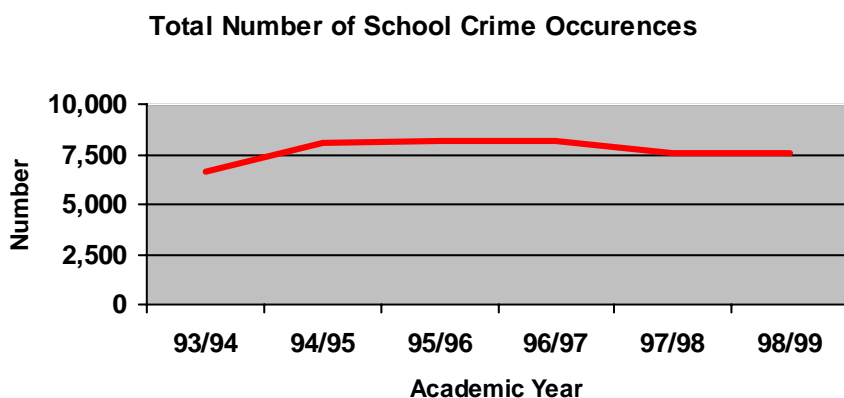
- The rate of violent crimes among students also declined during this period from 48 per 1,000 students, to 43 per 1,000 students, which equates to a drop of 10.4 percent since 1992.
- The number of students who were expelled for carrying firearms to school declined from 5,724 in 1996-1997 to 3,523 in 1998-1999 (38.5 percent).

Collectively these studies suggest that school-related crime and victimization were more problematic at the beginning of the 1990's with peaks in these behaviors occurring around 1994-1995. Since the middle of the decade improvements have occurred nationally with school-related crime declining during the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Numerous factors can be postulated as to why school crime is declining, including: the implementation of innovative programs such as School Resource Officers, Smart Start, after-school

programs, Communities in Schools, and DARE; student activism (SAVE chapters); increased security measures and crime prevention through environmental design; zero tolerance policies and the adoption of national models or blueprints for school violence reduction. It is also plausible that the decline in the general level of crime in the communities is directly correlated with declining school crime. Finally, mandatory reporting of school crime statistics has created attention among school administrators, parents and students which in turn forces accountability, and consequently both reactive and proactive action.

*Weapons possession remains a serious problem for the state's public school system.*

Figure 1 Total Number of School Crimes Reported by Academic Year



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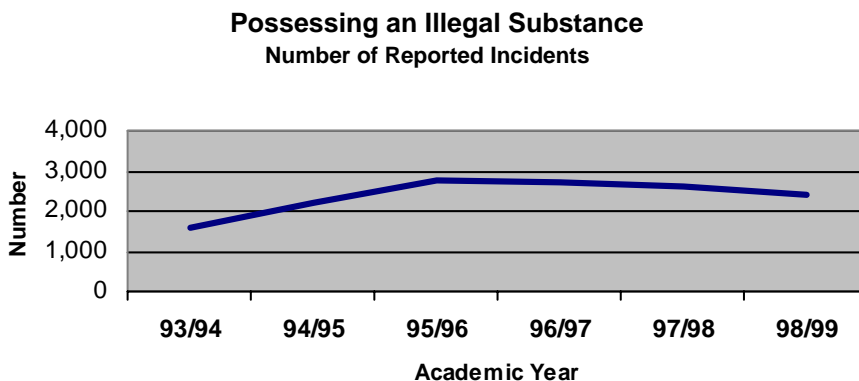
### State Trends

As Figure 1 (page 4) reveals, reported acts of school-related crime increased 12.8 percent from 1993/1994 to 1998/1999.<sup>1</sup> In 1993/1994, the first year the Department of Public Instruction (DPI) began collecting data, 6,683 total school crimes were reported or 5.7 acts per 1,000 public school students. By 1998/1999 this number had grown to 7,539 total acts or 6.2 per 1,000 students. Reported school crime peaked at 8,173 in 1995/1996 and has declined in each successive year. Since this peak year, reported school crime has dropped 7.8 percent with trends indicating further declines into the 21<sup>st</sup>

century. This peak in the mid-1990's, followed by the current downward spiral, is consistent with national trends.

Figures 2 – 4 depict trends in the three most commonly occurring offenses for which DPI compiles school crime data. These include: possession of substances, which refers to all drugs delineated in the North Carolina Controlled Substances Act; possession of a weapon, excluding firearms; and, assaults on school personnel such as teachers, administrators, support staff and volunteers.

Figure 2 Possession of Illegal Substances by Academic Year



The total number of reported incidents of students possessing illegal substances, grew from 1,587 in 1993/1994 to 2,389 in 1998/1999 (50.5 percent increase). As with school crime in general these episodes peaked in the mid-

90's and have begun to decline with fewer students possessing drugs today compared to their counterparts of the early and mid 1990's. Since the 1995/1996 school year possession of illegal substances has declined 13.2 percent.

<sup>1</sup> Caution should be exercised when examining this data. Increases may not necessarily reflect an increase in the actual level of school crime but could also reflect changes in reporting requirements and crime definitions, as well as an increase in the number of responding school systems.

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As Figure 3 depicts weapons possession remains a serious problem for the state's public school systems. The total number of incidents of students possessing weapons grew from 2,302 in 1993/1994 to 2,923 in 1998/1999. This represents an increase of 27 percent during this period. Unlike school crime in general and substance possession, this behavior has not demonstrated a decline since the mid 1990's. In fact weapons possession reached its trend high in the past school year.

Figure 4 presents the number of assaults that were perpetrated upon school employees. The number of assaults in academic year 1998/1999 (1,181) was 35.3 percent higher than the number recorded during the first year of baseline data collection (873). These assaults have slowly declined since 1995/1996 with the number in 1998/1999 being 18.2 percent lower than the peak year for these offenses. Assaults on school employees have remained relatively stable over the last two years.

Figure 3 Possession of a Weapon by Academic Year

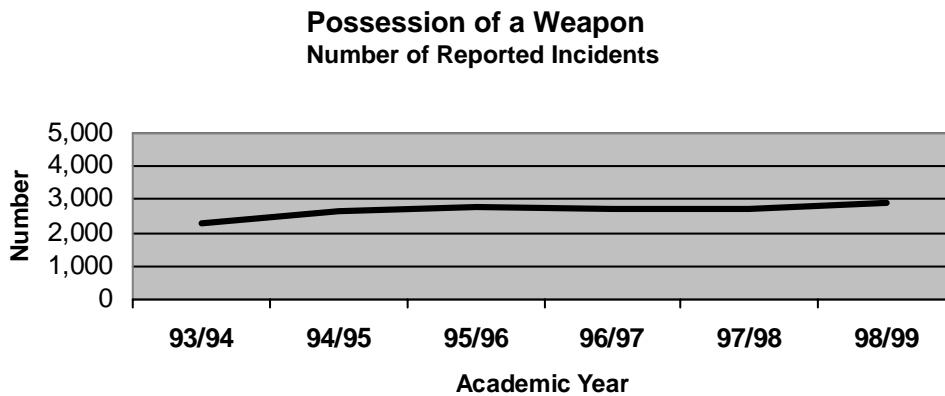
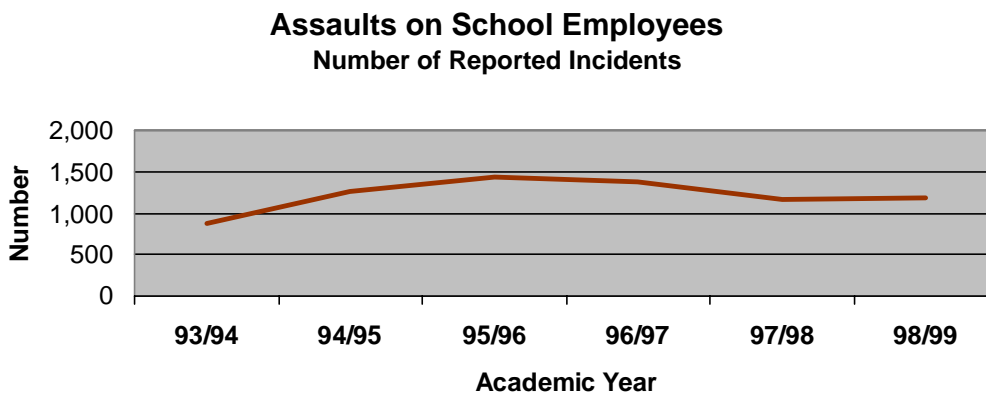


Figure 4 Assaults on School Employees by Academic Year



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Tremendous improvements have occurred in terms of reducing the number of school-related assaults that result in serious injury. These attacks were the highest during the early 1990's and have steadily declined over the course of the latter part of the decade. These assaults have dropped 39.4 percent since DPI began compiling school crime statistics. The greatest decline occurred between the 1994/1995 and 1995/1996 academic years. Since then school crime has remained relatively stable experiencing minor increases in 1996/1997 and 1998/1999.

The number of students who carry firearms to school, or possess them on school property, has rapidly declined since the 1993/1994 school year. This number has consistently declined every year since school crime statistics have been collected. Since 1993/1994 firearms possession has dropped from 448 incidents to the current low of 144 in 1998/1999. This equates to an overall decline of 67.9 percent during this period.

Assaults involving a weapon have also declined since 1993/1994. Assaults of this nature dropped 31.8 percent from 1993/1994 to 1998/1999. The most pronounced decline occurred between the 1994/1995 school year, in which a trend high of 241 were reported, and the following year in which 161 assaults were recorded. Assaults involving a weapon rose again to 194 in 1996/1997, declined to 126 the following year, and rose slightly to 146 in 1998/1999.

The number of reported sexual assaults and other sexual offenses followed a similar trend to the assaults involving weapons category. These sexual assaults and offenses were at their trend high between 1993/1994 and 1994/1995, experienced a dramatic drop during the 1995/1996 school year, rose slightly during 1996/1997, dropped for 1997/1998, and rose slightly again to 312 in 1998/1999. Overall, sexual assaults and other sexual offenses have declined 32.8 percent since the initial baseline data were compiled.

School-related robbery peaked at 331 incidents in the 1994/1995 school year and experienced another smaller peak in 1996/1997 with 239 incidents. Since

then it has consistently declined to slightly more than 100 incidents in the 1998/1999 academic year. The number of school-related robberies declined 54.1 percent from the 1993/1994 baseline data and 69.2 percent from the trend high in 1994/1995. Armed robberies at school appear to be a rare event with these types of robberies accounting for between 2 to 7 percent of the total number of robberies.

While crime in the state's public schools increased from 1993/1994 to 1998/1999 current trends indicate that this phenomenon has declined over the past several years with more of a decline anticipated as we move into the 21st Century. The most notable and recent declines have occurred in the number of students possessing drugs and firearms, the number of assaults which result in serious injury, as well as reductions in robberies and sexual assaults. Despite the decline in the number of students carrying firearms to school the possession of other weapons still remains problematic and appears to be on the rise. Despite recent trends, which document a leveling off period in the number of assaults on school employees and support staff, this assaultive behavior remains a serious issue, which has become more prominent since the early 1990s.

### Conclusion

In general, school crime was more prevalent during the early 1990s, peaked around 1995, and has declined in the last five years. However, the problems plaguing the nation's schools are also endemic to North Carolina's public schools. Despite the recent declines in school crime, at both the national and state levels, school crime still remains a concern for criminal justice policy makers and educators. Crews and Montgomery (2001) suggest that the schools of tomorrow will be more militaristic with added security and police features. They also suggest that more parents will utilize home schooling or send their children to private military schools to ensure their safety from public school violence. Drugs, weapons and assaults, especially those committed against adult teachers and staff, still pose serious threats to the learning

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environment. While gang activity in the schools has declined, gangs are nonetheless present in many schools including some of North Carolina's own junior and senior high schools (Yearwood and Hayes, 2000).

It appears that the plethora of programs, policies and legislative mandates are having their intended positive impact and are affecting the reduction of school crime and violence. The downward spiral in school-related crime is promising, and hopefully these programs will continue to reduce school crime into the 21st Century. Educators, school administrators, criminal justice professionals, parents and legislators must continue to work together to develop effective prevention and intervention programs and seek out effective, or best, practices and blueprints for addressing the problem of school crime and school violence. This will guarantee that the predicted militaristic schools of the future will not be present in North Carolina.

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