



School Violence and No Child Left Behind: Best Practices to Keep Kids Safe

By Lisa Snell

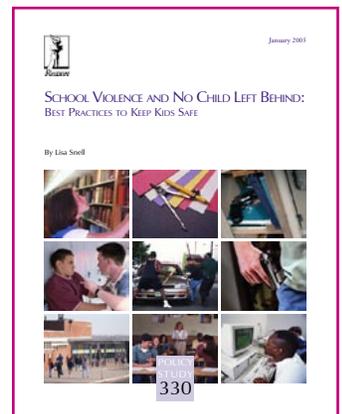
Most schools in the United States are relatively safe. Data on school crime point to a general decline in school violence in public schools in the past decade. The National Center for Education Statistics' 2004 Indicators of School Crime and Safety provides the most recent data on school violence. This ongoing statistical survey has found that the crime victimization rate at school declined from 48 violent victimizations per 1,000 students in 1992 to 24 such victimizations in 2002.

While the general data show a decline in school violence, this is not true for every school. In fact, most school violence is concentrated in a few schools. According to the National Center for Education Statistics during the 1999-2000 school year 2 percent of schools (1,600) accounted for

approximately 50 percent of serious violent incidents and 7 percent of public schools (5,400) accounted for 75 percent of serious violent incidents. It is critical that parents have information about which schools are safe and which schools have crime on campus.

In the 2003-2004 school year, only 52 of the nation's 92,000 public schools were labeled "persistently dangerous" under the No Child Left Behind Act, entitling students to move to a designated "safe" school. Based on the small number of schools that were labeled as dangerous, in September 2003 the Education Reform Subcommittee held a field hearing in Denver, Colorado to study how states are implementing No Child Left Behind's persistently dangerous schools provision. The hearing suggested some

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states are significantly underreporting the number of unsafe schools to sidestep the law's requirements. Testimony from a National Center for Education Statistics expert revealed that in 2001, 6 percent of students reported they had carried a weapon on school property, and the same percentage feared being attacked at school. A year earlier, in 2000, students were victims of about 700,000 nonfatal violent crimes while on school property. However, only 0.0006 percent of the nation's schools have been designated as "unsafe" by their states.

For example, violent crime is common at Locke High in Los Angeles. According to Los Angeles school police

statistics in 2000-2001 at Locke there were 13 sex offenses, 43 robberies, 2 weapons possessions, 57 batteries, and 19 assaults with a deadly weapon. In 2001-2002, there was 1 sex offense, 10 robberies, 31 property crimes, 19 batteries, and 3 assaults with a deadly weapon. Yet the school doesn't qualify as persistently dangerous under California's definition of a dangerous school.

Locke High School is not alone. Forty-four states and the District of Columbia reported not a single unsafe school. The exceptions were Pennsylvania (28), Nevada (8), New Jersey (7), Texas (6), New York (2) and Oregon (1). Obviously, schools that are not on the list are not necessarily crime-free. There were nearly 1.5 million violent crimes in America's schools in 2002. In fact, the 2003-2004 school year was one of the deadliest in years, with 48 school-related violent deaths from August 2003 through June 2004. That's more than in the past two school years combined and more than in any year in the past decade.

But despite the statistics and headlines, most schools in the United States are relatively safe and the risk of being killed at school is less than 1 in 1.7 million. The perception of dangerous schools is often overblown by media coverage of rare but horrific school shootings and other isolated incidents of extreme school violence. We recognize the general decline in school violence, but are most concerned with policies for those schools that still have a high rate of crime. In those schools, school violence may actually be underreported. It is critical that parents have information about which schools are safe and which schools have crime on campus.

If most violence is concentrated in a few schools, parents need to be aware of which schools are violent or safe in order to make the best decisions about where to enroll their children. Under the No Child Left Behind Act, students enrolled in a "persistently dangerous school" have the right to transfer to a safer school in the district. But each state has its own definition of dangerous. California says a "persistently dangerous" school must expel more than 1 percent of its students for any of nine types of crimes in each of three consecutive years. Locke rarely expels violent students. Instead, they're given "opportunity transfers" to other public schools; the worst kids may be sent to continuation school or adult education. Or they keep right on attending Locke. Since almost nobody is officially expelled, the school isn't "officially" dangerous.

In 1998, Reason Foundation published *Violence Prevention: Strategies to Keep Schools Safe*, which reviewed the strategies used by public schools to keep students safe. We divided school violence-prevention methods into three classes—measures related to school management (that is, related to discipline and punishment), measures related to environmental modification (for instance, video cameras, security guards, and uniforms), and educational and curriculum-based measures (for instance, conflict-resolution and gang-prevention programs). We found that all methods have their advantages and disadvantages.

Our research led us to the following conclusions:

Like the more mundane issues of pedagogy, textbooks, curriculum, and staffing and compensation policies, there is no one-size-fits-all solution to school violence. As William Modzeleski of the U.S. Department of Education put it, “There is no one program, no silver bullet, so that you can get one program up and say, Here it is, if you put this program in your school, you are going to resolve violence.” If all schools were the same, in demographically similar neighborhoods, with similar crime rates in the surrounding community, with similar-quality teachers and similarly committed staffs, and similar budgetary constraints, then we could feel safe advocating a common policy for all schools. But schools are self-evidently not like that. The ideal violence-prevention policy will likely be different for each school.

For most anti-violence interventions, evidence of effectiveness is either sparse or mixed. Many programs have been imperfectly monitored or evaluated, so few data on results exist. Those programs that have been monitored work in some cases and not in other cases. There are so many variables that it is difficult to recognize success or failure in school violence-prevention programs. Therefore, the most reliable way of distinguishing between the real and the faddish is to subject individual schools, in their experimentation, to the discipline of competition. Schools choose their anti-violence programs; parents should be allowed to choose their children’s schools.

Our general conclusion was to encourage innovation and experimentation in schools through decentralization and deregulation. Incentives matter, so effectively addressing school violence must include some level of parental choice, and an emphasis on private, voluntary, contractual methods rather than compulsory ones.



In revisiting the school violence issue, we explain how school policymakers can more effectively provide parents with more information about violence in their schools and allow them to exit violent and dangerous schools. We also recommend best practices for reporting school violence to parents and reducing school violence more generally.

Best practices for school violence incident reporting

1. Report incidents at school level
2. Report incidents by specific crime categories
3. Include similar schools’ ranking to show how much out of norm or geographic ranking
4. Indicate whether school self reports or uses police data or both
5. Develop standardized reporting system across districts

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR EVALUATING, REPORTING, AND REDUCING SCHOOL VIOLENCE

Parents want their children to be safe at school. While schools have often used external measures to counteract school violence, school policymakers don't always have the correct incentives to ensure that their schools are safe. The threat of reduced school enrollment and the right of students to exit an unsafe school is a powerful incentive to get schools to reduce crime. However, schools need transparency about the level of school crime so parents can help drive school-level change. School administrators have every incentive to underreport school crime. Legislators should require school districts to provide parents with more information about the safety of their schools and more choices for smaller and safer schools.

1. Revise the state and federal law to loosen or eliminate restrictions on school choice. The act of choosing and the related imperative for schools to make themselves choice-worthy is the key to any serious anti-violence policy. Forced assignment to schools and the resulting mismatches and detachment beget boredom and violence. Parents care about keeping their kids safe. If they can compare school safety along with other performance data, and if school competition is legal, that competition will apply pressure on schools to control violence. Since there is no one-size-fits-all approach that controls school violence, competition and the right of parents to exit violent schools is the best incentive to help all schools to reduce school violence.

2. Encourage smaller schools, competition, and new school capacity. Strong evidence points to the correlation between school size and school violence. Private and charter schools cater to parents' demand for smaller schools. Federal and state legislators should enforce provisions of the No Child Left Behind Act that require accurate reporting of dangerous schools. Legislation should require school districts to move away from school consolidation toward smaller schools. In the past decade, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation provided \$745 million in grant money to promote small schools, and increase the impact. One example is \$51.2 million to New York City's public schools to fund



67 small, theme-based high schools, each of which will limit enrollment to a maximum of 500 students.

A little over two months ago, Chicago announced that about 60 of its worst schools will close. One hundred smaller schools with new staff and new programs will replace them. The district plans to operate one-third of them, and evenly split the other two-thirds between chartered, mostly secondary schools, and schools managed by independent contractors.

3. Focus resources on a “broken windows” approach to preventing school violence. Cleaning up school facilities and getting tougher on smaller crimes may prevent more serious crimes. Controlling crime before it is serious enough for metal detectors, locker searches, and video cameras is really the most effective management strategy for school violence. Schools need incentives to create consequences for bad behavior before it escalates to the point where students know they can get away with serious violent behavior. School-level management needs to invest more resources, time, and effort into running the school with sufficient observations and proactive responses to curtail serious crime. As in the New York City schools, keeping the school clean and targeting smaller school offenses is the first step to reducing school violence. This may also entail renegotiating labor contracts that have allowed basic maintenance and school clean up to be a low priority or neglected altogether.

4. Create uniform reporting standards. Parents and local and state school officials need to understand their own



violence problem relative to other schools and other school priorities. This will help them determine which school violence prevention strategies are working and whether or not progress is being made. At the state level, and perhaps even the federal level, states should have consistent definitions for school violence incidents that make school crime data comparable across individual schools so parents can make informed decisions about the safety of their schools. Pennsylvania and Florida demonstrate the usefulness of consistent crime data across all schools in one state.

5. Follow federal guidelines for defining “persistently dangerous” schools. The federal government should require states to use more accurate definitions for dangerous schools and include all types of violent incidents including rape and assault. Schools need solid definitions uniformly applied. Schools need to understand why some crimes are reported to the police and some are not. Schools need more transparency about the decisions they make in regards to crime reporting in order to evaluate when those decisions need to change. If No Child Left Behind is going to base a demand for change on meeting a set criteria for dangerous schools, then the criteria needs to be explicit, and those criteria have to be strongly enforced.

6. Use school violence outcomes—not processes—as a measure of dangerous schools. Schools should use the actual incidents of crime and not the processes, such as expulsion or criminal prosecution, to judge the violence in a specific school. Measures of detentions, expulsions, or school transfers are not measures of school violence.

7. Make crime statistics part of school report cards. Crime data should be required as part of a school’s report card alongside academic data and teacher experience. The best approach to reporting school crime would combine best practices from the few districts that report comprehensive crime statistics and include reports of crime over time, specific incidents by specific crime, and a similar school ranking to demonstrate how dangerous each school is compared to other schools in the district.

8. Report crime data in a timely fashion. Persistently dangerous schools should be labeled based on the previous school year’s data and that data should be reported to parents in a timely fashion.

9. Include similar schools’ rankings. Crime data reporting should include rankings of similar schools to help parents compare the violence level between schools. Without benchmarks, parents and school decision-makers have no context for judging data. If schools officials know how much crime is at their school, but not whether that is high or low compared to similar schools, they don’t know very much.

10. Enforce the unsafe school choice option for student victims. Students who are the victims of school crime should immediately be allowed to transfer to a safer public school. If a safer public school is not available, the student should be provided with a school voucher to go to a private school. The provisions of the No Child Left Behind Act that require schools to make academic progress on standardized tests, have resulted in some schools being closed or reconstituted and some schools being competitively bid to be run by outside operators such as charter groups, nonprofits, or for-profit school operators. Yet, the NCLB has failed to adequately identify which schools are dangerous. And because safety seems to be a prerequisite for raising test scores, it seems crucial that the same competitive provisions such as closing schools, allowing local voucher or tax credit programs to give students the right of exit, or competitively bidding dangerous schools would be critical to reducing violence and ultimately improving student achievement. For this to happen, the No Child Left Behind Act must become more than just lip service to safer schools. The provisions that cover dangerous schools must be revised to be more binding and uniformly enforced.

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Lisa Snell is director of the Education Program at Reason Foundation where she oversees Reason Foundation's research on social services and education issues. Her most recent policy studies include *Special Education Accountability: Structural Reform to Help Charter Schools Make*

the Grade and Child Advocacy Centers: One-Stop on the Road to Performance-based Child Protection.

Ms. Snell frequently comments on education issues on radio and television media including recent appearances on the Fox News Channel, ABC's "Wall Street Journal Report," and numerous regional news programs. Ms. Snell has published numerous articles and op-eds on school choice in newspapers including the Las Vegas Review Journal, Orange County Register, and the Los Angeles Daily News and frequently speaks about this issue. She is a frequent contributor to Reason magazine and a monthly columnist for Reason Foundation's Privatization Watch.

Before joining Reason, Ms. Snell taught public speaking and argumentation courses at California State University, Fullerton. She was also a recipient of the 1994 Charles G. Koch Fellowship and worked on public policy issues for the Institute for Justice and Reason magazine.

RELATED STUDIES

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