

# Background

## INFORMATION

### *Why it is Important to Work with Communities and Families to make Schools Safer?*

**Schools.** The reasons why it is important for schools to be safe are manifold. At least two prime reasons, however, come to mind. First, school violence places both educators and students at risk of injury or even death. Neither educators nor students should be subjected to such risk.

Second, violence, or the threat of violence, impedes the teaching and learning process and thus student achievement (Barton et. al. 1998; NEA 2005; Verdugo and Schneider 1999).<sup>2</sup> Schools are not battlegrounds. They serve very specific functions for society, as places where children are introduced to a social system and given the foundation for learning that will be with them for the rest of their lives. In schools, students also learn skills for later use in the labor market or in higher education and acquire citizenship skills for becoming active participants in society's political and social processes. Moreover, in schools, students and adults find the prototype of the social system in which they live and learn the history and values emanating from that social system. These are fundamental imperatives for any society, and violence in schools impedes the broader educational process that contributes to their fulfillment.

**Communities.** It is important for public school employees to work with communities because community dysfunctions seed school violence. If anti-social behaviors, such as gang involvement and drug abuse, exist in a community, students will bring these problems with them to

schools. If unemployment is high in a community, students will carry the frustration, disillusionment and, perhaps, anger their families are experiencing into their classrooms.

To reduce school violence, public school employees must work with community groups and government agencies with the expertise and knowledge to ameliorate the problem. They can also take the initiative in assembling the individuals, groups, and governmental agencies, which rarely work together, to resolve their school and community problems.

**Families.** Working with families is important because, in most cases, violent behavior is learned behavior that originated in the home (National Research Council 1998; Reiss and Roth 1993). The family stands as a child's first socializing agent within the larger social system. Through the family, children learn the norms of social and individual behavior. If, however, children are raised in violent families, they will learn dysfunctional behaviors that will then be applied in various social settings, including schools.

In fact, families are often complicit in a vicious cycle of violence. Children raised in violent families are more apt as adults to raise their own children in a similar manner (Lauritsen 2003). Violent children become violence-prone adults who raise other violence-prone children—and perpetuate school violence. This cycle also perpetuates mental health problems, such as depression, social isolation, and anti-social behavior, which may severely impede a child's ability to learn.

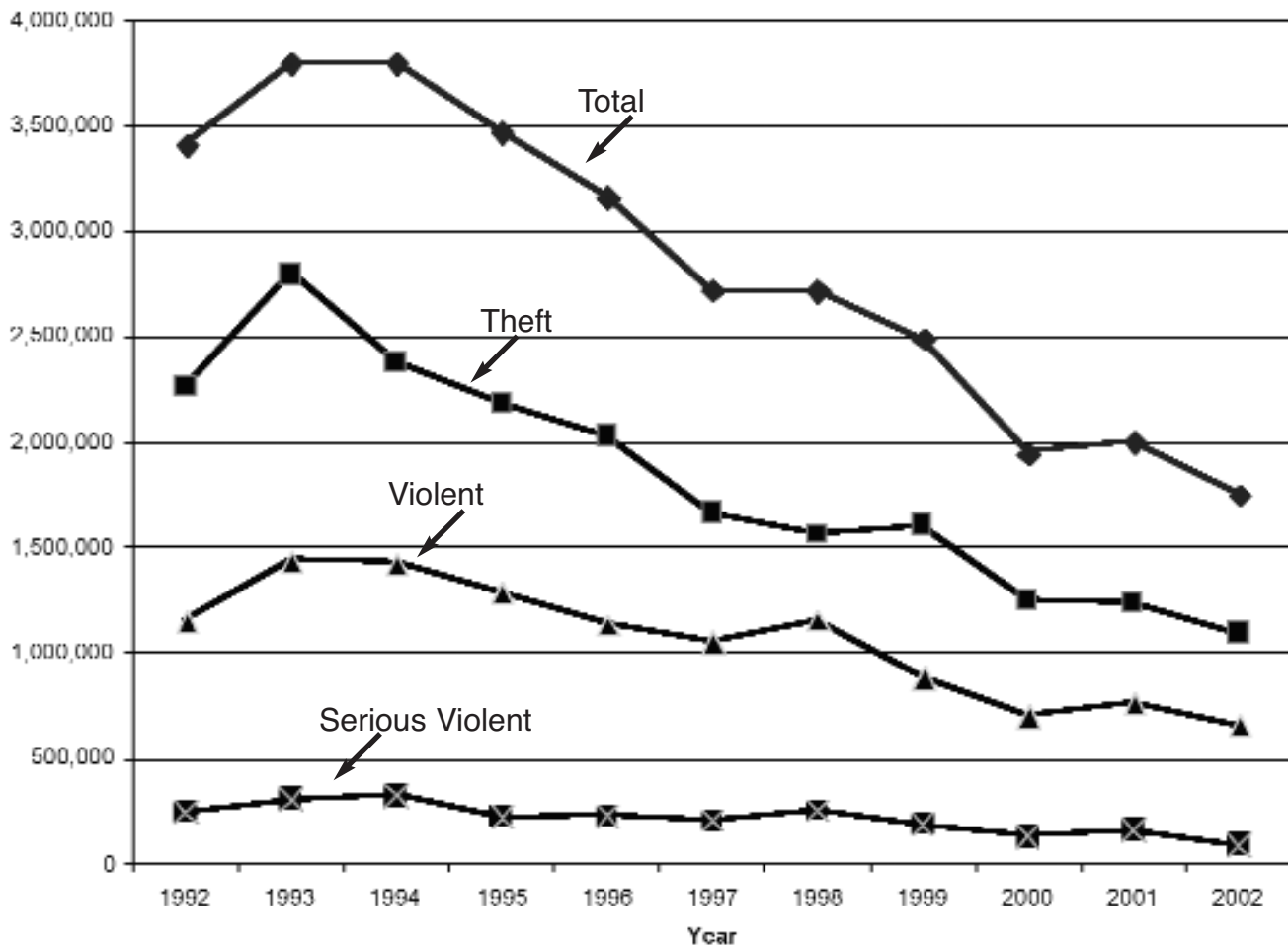
<sup>2</sup> School crime and violence also includes such inappropriate behavior as hate behavior directed at students/adults with different sexual orientations, sexual harassment, and hateful behavior directed at persons of different ethnic/racial and cultural backgrounds.

### *What Research says about Violence in Schools, Communities, and Families.*

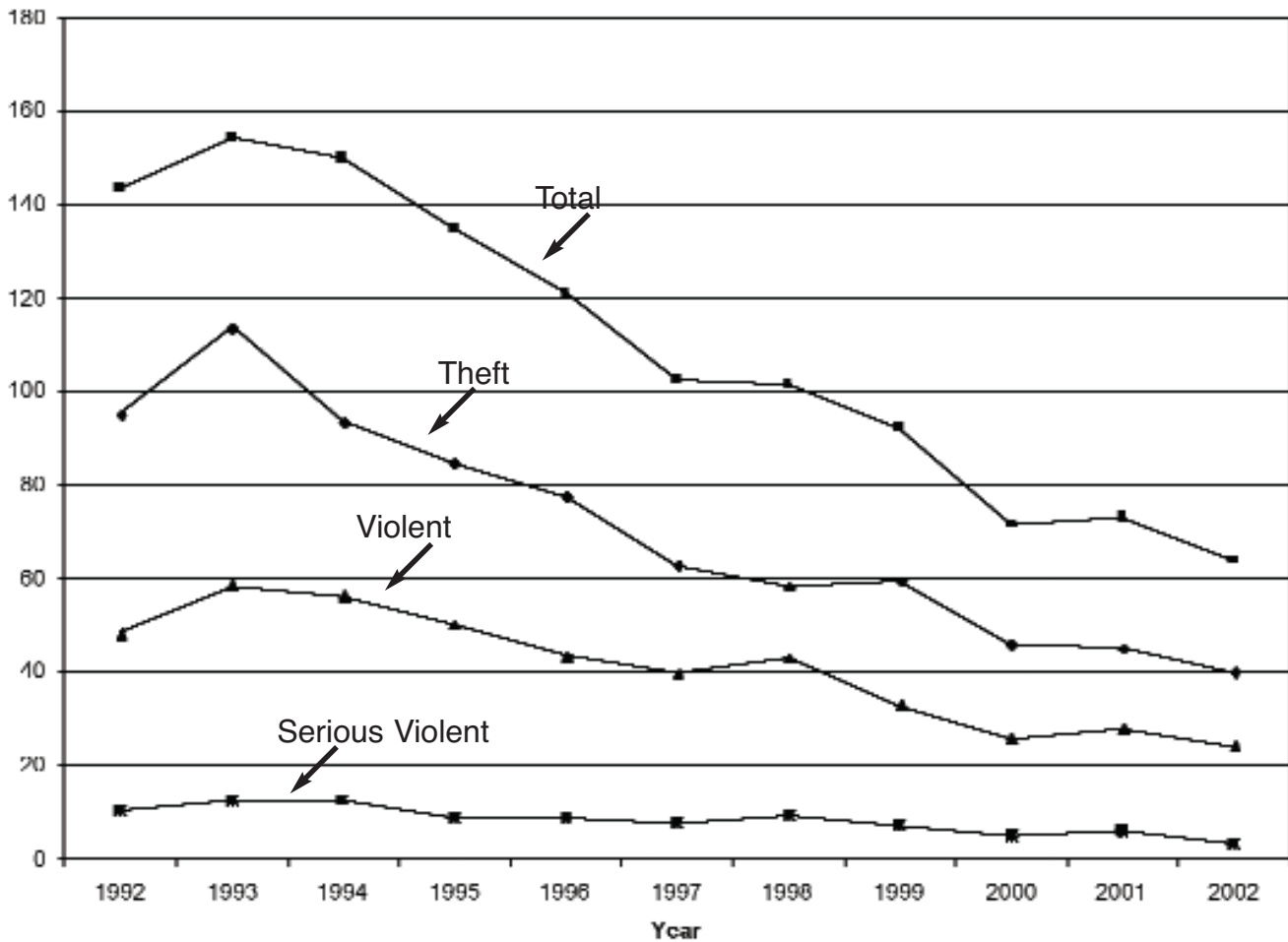
**Schools.** Although, schools are generally safe places, several troubling issues must be addressed to make them safer.

*Injuries and Assaults—Students and Teachers:* Data for this section may be found in Figures 1 and

2.<sup>3</sup> Figure 1 presents data on the actual number of incidents for the years 1992 to 2002, while Figure 2 presents the rate of incidents over the same time period (that is, incidents per 1,000 students). For both statistics, nonfatal crimes against students declined significantly between 1992 and 2002. Indeed, in 1992 there were 3.4 million nonfatal crimes in schools and by 2002 the figure had dropped to 1.8 million crimes.



<sup>3</sup> Data are from NCES/USDOJ (2005).



These are absolute figures and they fail to take into consideration the number of students age 12 to 18. So, a better picture can be derived by looking at rates per 1,000 students. Figure 2 exhibits such data. Again, the rate per 1,000 students declined between 1992 and 2002: from 144 crimes per 1,000 students to 64 per 1,000 students in 2002.

What about teachers? Teachers are also victims of crime in school, though to a considerably lesser extent than students. Consequently, data are aggregated over a given time span. Data in Table 1 present information on the number and

percentage of teachers threatened by students in 1993–94 and in 1999–2000.

There are two stories being told in Table 1. First, threats against teachers declined over that six-year period. In 1993, approximately 12 percent (11.7%) of teachers reported having been threatened with injury by a student. In 1999, the percentage dropped to about 9 percent (8.8%).

Second, while percentages declined, schools in the central cities had a greater percentage of teachers threatened, both in 1993 and 1999.

**Table 1. Percent and number of teachers who reported being threatened with injury by a student in public schools during the past 12 months: 1993-1994 and 1999-2000**

		<b>1993-1994</b>				<b>1999 -2000</b>										
<b>PERCENT</b>		<b>NUMBER</b>				<b>PERCENT</b>				<b>NUMBER</b>						
		Urban fringe/ large town	Small town/ rural	Urban fringe/ large town	Small town/ rural	Central City	Urban fringe/ large town	Small town/ rural	Central City	Urban fringe/ large town	Small town/ rural	Central City	Urban fringe/ large town	Small town/ rural		
Total Public	12.8	17.8	11.6	10.2	325,400	126,800	92,600	10,600	9.6	13.5	7.9	8.6	287,400	109,300	119,300	58,800
Total:																

Source: NCERS/USDOJ. 2005. Indicators of School Crime and Safety: 2004. US Departments of Education and Justice. Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office.

**Table 2. Percent and number of public school teachers reporting that they were physically attacked by a student during the previous 12 months: 1993-1994 and 1999-2000**

		<b>1993-1994</b>				<b>1999 -2000</b>										
<b>PERCENT</b>		<b>NUMBER</b>				<b>PERCENT</b>				<b>NUMBER</b>						
		Urban fringe/ large town	Small town/ rural	Urban fringe/ large town	Small town/ rural	Central City	Urban fringe/ large town	Small town/ rural	Central City	Urban fringe/ large town	Small town/ rural	Central City	Urban fringe/ large town	Small town/ rural		
Total Public	4.4	6.4	4.2	3.2	110,700	45,100	32,900	32,600	4.2	6.2	3.5	3.1	125,000	50,700	53,200	21,200
Total:																

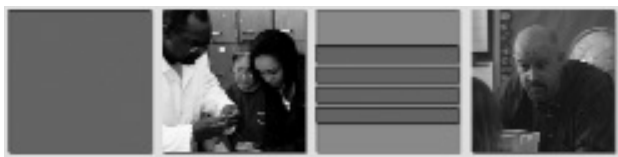
Source: NCERS/USDOJ. 2005. Indicators of School Crime and Safety: 2004. US Departments of Education and Justice. Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office. Details may not sum to totals because of rounding. Numbers are rounded to the nearest 100.

Table 2 presents data on the percent and number of teachers actually assaulted during the school years 1993 and 1999. These data are similar to those in Table 1.

First, there is a slight decline in attacks against teachers by students between 1993 and 1999: 4.1 versus 3.9.

Second, teachers are more likely to be attacked in central city schools than in other areas. There is also a very slight decline in these data.

**Communities.** Certain aspects of community violence have a direct bearing on school violence, and this can be seen by variation in crime and violence by community type—urban, suburban, rural (see figure 3).

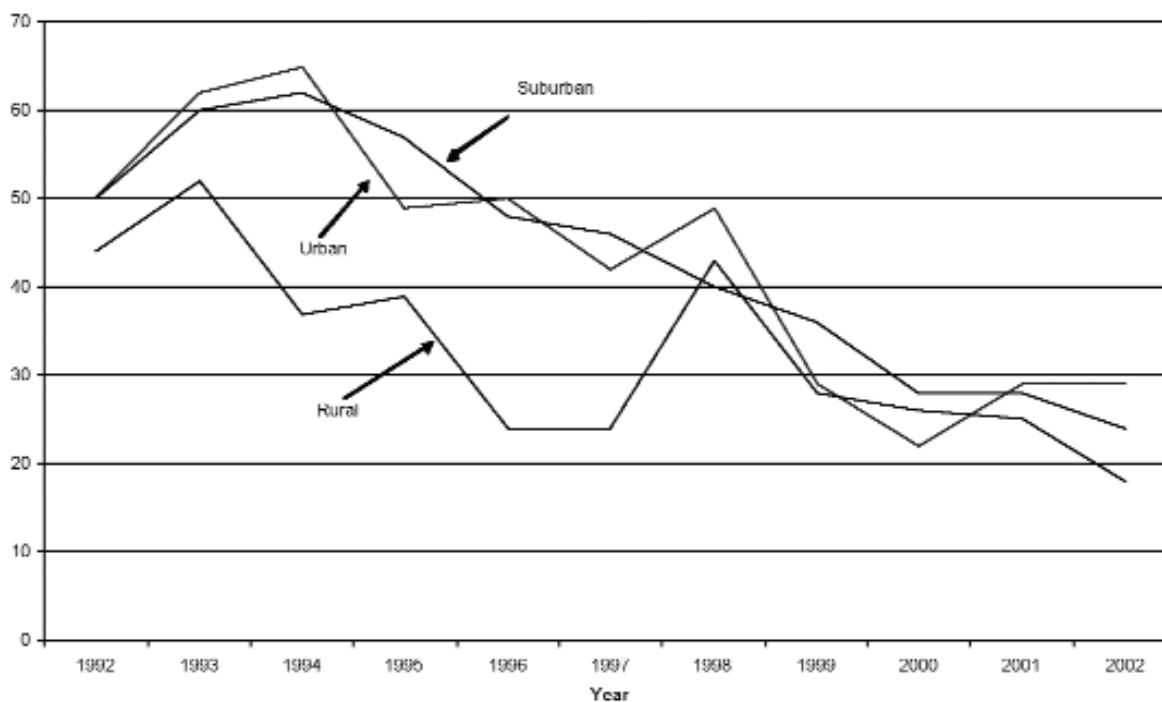


*Correlation Between Community Violence and School Violence.* Perhaps the most important indicator of this correlation is between general violence and school violence by community type. Statistics show that the incidence of both kinds of violence increases the closer one comes to urban areas, especially those containing the most disadvantaged communities. Lauritsen (2003: 5) says:

...community disadvantage does not have a substantial influence on violence risk until the 80th percentile. For most youth (about 80 percent of the adolescent population), community characteristics are unlikely to account for the differences in their risk for violence. However, for the 20 percent of youth in the least advantaged communities, the risk for violence is much higher.

The same pattern holds for teenage victims and for school violence in general. Data are presented below that chart the rate of nonfatal crime against students by community type for the years 1992 to 2002 (Data are from NCES/USDOJ 2005).

**Figure 3 Rates per 1,000 students of violent, non-fatal crimes against students ages 12-18: 1992-2002**



These data indicate that urban and suburban areas have the highest and yet nearly the same rates of violent nonfatal crimes perpetrated against students. Although some differences over the time span are exhibited in the chart, especially during the late 1990s, the general pattern is nearly identical. Note, also, that rates are generally lower in rural schools.

**Community-School Partnerships.** Working with the community to reduce school violence is an important and necessary strategy. Research indicates that programs using such a strategy tend to be very successful (Drug Strategies, Inc. 1998; Gottfredson 1998; Guerra and Williams 1996; Newkumet and Casserly 1994; Tolan and Guera 1998; U.S. GAO 1995; Williams et al. 1997). These programs are successful because they are inclusive, as indicated in the following statement from the National Crime Prevention Council (1994):

“All partnerships that bring together law enforcement officials and the community are founded on common concerns and goals and on a shared belief that everyone must play a role in preventing violence.”

**Families.** The research on how family violence affects children and, thus, school violence is very clear (Chalk and King 1998; Lauritsen 2003; Reiss and Roth 1993). Complicating matters are the changes undergone by the modern American family over the past 50 years—in structure, function, and roles assigned to family members.

Today, various constellations of people constitute a family. And most traditional family functions, such as provisions for education, health care, and economic support, are shared by community, business, government, and religious institutions. Indeed, most traditional family roles, such as caregiver and wage earner, have become less defined. Combined with advances in technology and growing materialism, these changes have contributed to role confusion and family violence. At the same time, television (with its prevalence for violent programming) affects every home. Other complicating factors include the easy availability of illicit drugs and children being left alone at home while parents or guardians work or look for

work. Some results of the complex changes and the ensuing violence are—

- **Bullying—**Children who are abused in families are apt to become bullies on the playground. (See Ross 2003 for an excellent overview of bullying in schools.)
- **Feelings of Guilt and Responsibility—**Children who experience family violence often have feelings of guilt and a sense of responsibility for their mother’s or father’s plight. These feelings can become generalized so that children feel responsible for whatever may go wrong in school.
- **Social Isolation—**Children who come from violent homes are more apt than others to be socially isolated. They often don’t relate well to their peers, are shy, and have trouble expressing their feelings.
- **Poor Academic Performance—**Children from violent homes tend to be poor academic performers. These children have difficulty concentrating, present behavioral problems, are frequently absent from school, and often have a history of conflict with other children (NRC 1998; Reiss and Roth 1993).
- **Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgendered (GLBT) students—**There is concern that GLBT students are being increasingly harassed and assaulted on school grounds. In 1991 and 2001, a majority (84%) of GLBT students reported hearing homophobic remarks. Also, 39.1 percent reported being physically harassed, and 64.3 percent of GLBT students reported feeling unsafe at school (GLSEN 2004). There are important educational consequences for GLBT students who are harassed: those who are harassed have grade point averages 10 percent lower than GLBT students who are not harassed (GLSEN 2004).

