Myths about School Violence
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School Survey Hoax

A widely publicized survey comparing public school problems in 1940 with modern school problems has been circulating for over twenty years, but the survey is a hoax invented for political purposes. The false survey of "top problems of public schools in 1940" listed items such as talking, chewing gum, and running in the halls. This list contrasted dramatically with an accompanying list of modern school problems that included drug abuse, pregnancy, suicide, assault, and other serious problems. In the 1980's and 90's the two lists were widely cited by educational authorities and political pundits such as William Bennett, Rush Limbaugh, Carl Rowan, and George Will. The lists appeared in national news magazines such as Time and Newsweek, and newspapers such as The New York Times and Wall Street Journal; they were cited in numerous speeches and were aired on CBS News (O'Neill, 1994).

A skeptical professor at Yale University, Barry O'Neill, investigated the origins of the lists and in the process collected over 250 different versions of the claimed surveys. Eventually, Professor O'Neill traced the surveys to T. Cullen Davis of Fort Worth, Texas (O'Neill, 1994). Mr. Davis was a wealthy oil businessman and fundamentalist Christian who in 1982 constructed the lists as part of an effort to attack public education. He shared the lists with some like-minded colleagues, who assisted in their dissemination. Asked how he arrived at the lists, Mr. Cullen told Professor O'Neill, "They weren't done from a scientific survey. How did I know what the offenses in the schools were in 1940? I was there. How do I know what they are now? I read the newspapers" (p. 48, O'Neill, 1994).

Although the lists were exposed as a hoax in 1994, they continue to be cited as factual. For example, at a 2001 school safety conference at a midwestern state, an official from the U.S. Department of Education began her keynote address by presenting the same lists, unaware that they were fabricated. The point of this observation is that all of us are susceptible to misinformation about school crime and violence. Educators must be cautious about studies with bold or dramatic claims, and should demand credible evidence from firsthand sources.

According to Snopes.com, the mythical list appeared in a full-page ad in USA Today placed by the American Family Association in July 2007.

Myths about Youth Violence and School Safety

The highly publicized school shootings of the 1990’s generated nationwide concern about the safety of our schools. The news media focused national attention on little-known places such as Pearl, Mississippi; Paducah, Kentucky; and Jonesboro, Arkansas where young boys opened fire on their classmates. In 1999, Columbine High School became the center of national attention when two boys went on a shooting rampage that killed twelve students and a teacher before they killed themselves. Live television coverage of the Columbine tragedy began while students were still hiding in the school and police were attempting to find the shooters. In the following weeks
the American public was exposed to numerous images of bloody victims and interviews with traumatized, grief-stricken survivors.

There was a dramatic national response to the school shootings. Both the U.S. Senate and the House of Representatives held hearings on youth violence, the White House held a conference on school violence, and both the FBI and Secret Service conducted studies of school shootings (O’Toole, 2000; Vossekuil, Fein, Reddy, Borum, & Modzeleski, 2002). The U.S. Department of Education distributed “warning signs” guidebooks to schools giving advice on identifying potentially violent students (Dwyer, Osher, & Warger, 1998) and the U.S. Surgeon General (2001) released a major report on youth violence. Less obvious, but even more important, local school authorities across the country adopted new security measures, implemented tougher zero tolerance policies, and greatly expanded their use of school resource officers and school security officers.

Although the school shootings stimulated new attention to the problem of school safety and brought about many positive changes in relationships between schools and law enforcement agencies, public perceptions are easily skewed by media attention to a handful of extreme cases. The school shootings frightened the public and generated a widespread belief that there was an epidemic of violence in our schools. As the facts presented here demonstrate, this epidemic was a myth. School violence did not increase in the 1990’s, it declined.

This pattern has been repeated after other high-profile shootings, such as the 2007 shootings at Virginia Tech and the 2012 shootings at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut. The Newtown shootings prompted nearly 90% of school districts in the United States to upgrade their security at a cost of approximately 5 billion dollars (Linskey, 2013). Although high profile shootings in schools generate understandable concern, schools are objectively safe places with a very low rate of violent crime, including homicide. Approximately 1 percent of homicides of school-age children occur in schools (Modzeleski et al., 2008). Statistically, the average school can expect a student to be murdered at school about once every 6,000 years (Borum et al., 2010).

The public may feel that school security is so important that the additional expenditures are necessary. However, multiple studies have found that the additional school security measures do not substantially increase school safety and on the contrary often make students feel less safe at school (Bachman, Randolph, Brown, 2011; Gastic, 2011; Hankin, Hertz, & Simon, 2011; Petrosino, Guckenburg, & Fronius, 2012). When school funds are diverted to security, there is less funding available for teachers, mental health professionals, and prevention services. Educators should question whether they should sacrifice student support and prevention services in order to fund security measures of questionable value.

Consequently, it is important to guard against fear-based perceptions of school violence. Policy decisions about school safety must be based on objective information. School administrators and policy-makers must maintain a rational and factual perspective on school safety. Here are five myths about youth violence and school safety that threaten to distort school safety policy and practices:
Myth 1. Juvenile violence is increasing.

Facts: According to FBI national arrest statistics, the arrest rate of juveniles for violent crime (murder, robbery, rape, and aggravated assault) peaked in 1994 and then declined dramatically (Snyder, 2004). The most dramatic decline in juvenile violence is seen for homicides, the category with the most complete and reliable data. As shown below, there were more than four times as many juveniles arrested for murder in 1993 than in 2013. Arrest data from Table 38 in the FBI Uniform Crime Reports <https://www.fbi.gov/about-us/cjis/ucr/crime-in-the-u.s>.

Juvenile Arrests for Homicide: 1993 to 2013
Myth 2. Juveniles are more violent than adults.

Myth 3. School violence is increasing.

Facts: The rate of violent crimes in U.S. public schools has declined substantially since 1994 (Robers, Zhang, Morgan, & Musu-Gillette, 2015). The serious violent crime rate (total number of aggravated assaults, robberies, and rapes per 100,000 students) in 2013 was less than a third what it was in 1994.

The drop in serious violent crime is not unique to schools. There has been a broader decline in serious violent crime in the United States since the mid 1990’s.
Myth 4. School homicides are increasing.

Facts: Media attention to several school shootings resulted in a series of copycat crimes during the late 1990’s, briefly interrupting an otherwise downward trend (Counts of fatal school shootings obtained from National School Safety Center, 2010).
Myth 5. There is a realistic possibility of a student being murdered at your school.

The 2012 shooting massacre at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newton, Connecticut stimulated tremendous fear that schools were dangerous places. Communities across the country diverted tax dollars to school security measures and armed guards. Fortunately, the tragedy in Newton was an aberration. Homicides of students at school are rare events in comparison the risk of homicide outside of schools. According to U.S. Department of Education data, there is an average of 21 homicides of students in the nation’s 125,000 elementary and secondary schools each year. Simple division (125,000 divided by 21) reveals that the average school can expect a student homicide about once every 6,000 years (Borum et al., 2010).

A national study of school-associated homicides found that an average of more than two dozen school-age children were murdered every week in the United States, but only about 1% of those murders took place in schools (Modzeleski et al., 2008).

Our study of homicide locations found that murders are statistically rare in schools compared to other locations (Nekvasil, Cornell, & Huang, 2015). In a 37-state sample of 18,875 homicide incidents recorded in the Federal Bureau Investigation’s National Incident Based Reporting System (NIBRS), only 49 incidents comprising less than .3 percent of the total took place in schools. The majority (52%) of homicides took place in residences and 30% took place in parking lots or roads.

Consider that restaurants have about ten times as many homicides as schools. What if there was massive media attention to every shooting in a restaurant with vivid accounts of the victims, survivors, and grieving family members? Would there be national concern about restaurant violence, a rush to fortify restaurant entrances, and a call from the National Rifle Association that restaurant servers should carry guns?
Gun violence is a serious problem in the United States, but this problem is less likely to occur in schools than almost any other location. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2015a, 2015b), there are approximately 84,258 nonfatal injuries and 32,351 deaths every year involving guns. These figures translate into about 319 shootings, including 88 deaths, every day in the United States. The gun homicide rate is far higher in the United States than other developed nations, and is at least seven times higher than rates in Australia, Canada, France, Germany, India, Italy, Japan, South Korea, Spain, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and many others (see Alpers & Wilson, 2013).
How dangerous are our schools?

Schools are not dangerous places. The perception that schools are dangerous is a misperception generated by a series of extreme, high profile cases that are not representative of most schools. In fact, very few serious violent crimes take place at school. From the standpoint of violent crime, students are safer at school than at home. Moreover, schools have become even safer in recent decades, such that the serious violent crime rate at school is less than half what it was in 1994.

Although there are relatively few serious violent crimes at school, there are many less serious crimes and there are numerous discipline problems—primarily disorderly conduct and fights that do not result in injuries—that demand attention. Bullying, teasing, and harassment are common problems that deserve attention in every school, too (Cornell & Mayer, 2010).

Schools are relatively safe, but they are not crime-free and we have an obligation to keep them as safe as possible. To keep schools safe, it is important to recognize what kinds of crimes are likely or unlikely to occur, and to base decisions on facts rather than fears.

References


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