

What makes a high school safe from bullying and violence?

Virginia High School Safety Study
Overview of Study Findings for APA 2008

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School Characteristic or Safety Measure	Aggressive Discipline Violations	Student Victimization	Teacher Victimization	Student-Perceived Bullying	Teacher-Perceived Bullying
School Characteristics					
School size (number of students enrolled in grades 9-12)	-.29*	.04	.16*	.11	.16*
School poverty (% eligible for free or reduced price meals)	.36*	.03	.23*	.15*	.10
School composition (% minority students)	.23*	.06	.44*	.07	.28*
Community crime (violent crime rate in school district)	.01	-.00	-.03	-.21*	-.15*
Population Density (ranges from rural to urban)	.02	-.06	.16*	-.09	.12
Gangs (teacher reports of frequency of gang activity at school)	.17*	.14*	.58*	.30*	.52*
Structure, Security, and Discipline					
Structure (rules perceived by students as strictly enforced)	.02	-.24**	-.23**	-.27**	-.25**
Structure (rules perceived by teachers as strictly enforced)	-.01	-.08	-.55**	-.25**	-.54**
Security measures (locked doors, cameras, metal detectors, etc.)	-.01	.00	.17**	.12*	.20**
Zero tolerance expulsion rate	.23*	.09	.07	.04	.11
Support Efforts					
Supportive environment (students perceive teachers as caring)	-.14*	-.38*	-.31*	-.51*	-.34*
Student willingness to seek adult help for bullying and violence	-.25*	-.30*	-.25*	-.36*	-.26*
Teacher perceptions of willingness to help students	-.01	-.03	-.16*	-.01	-.15*
Administration support of teachers (as perceived by teachers)	-.04	-.18*	-.54*	-.26*	-.57*
Health and prevention programs (reported by teachers)	-.22*	-.10	-.43*	-.22*	-.49*

* $p < .05$. More complex analyses controlling for school demographics will be found in the complete presentation and related papers in preparation.

Virginia High School Safety Study Summary

The Virginia High School Safety Study was designed to identify effective policies and practices in Virginia public high schools. Safety conditions were measured from the perspectives of school discipline records, 9th grade students, and 9th grade teachers. Our findings indicate that schools serving more disadvantaged student populations experience more aggressive disciplinary violations, bullying, and teacher victimization, but there are school policies and practices that are associated with safer school conditions even under challenging conditions. Most notably, schools that provide both a more structured and supportive environment have consistently less aggressive behavior, bullying, and teacher victimization. Structure is best created through school rules that are fairly and strictly enforced. Structure in the form of zero tolerance expulsion practices or security measures was not associated with better safety conditions. A supportive environment is characterized by student perceptions that teachers are caring and responsive to requests for help, and teacher perceptions that their administrators are fair and respectful of them. School safety is also associated with the availability of programs to foster healthy social and emotional development and to respond to problems such as substance abuse, bullying, and conflict.

Participants were selected from school rosters using a series of random numbers designed to obtain 25 students and 10 teachers from school. A total of 294 schools participated in the study, which represents 94% of the 314 eligible public high schools in Virginia. In the spring of 2007, a total of 7,431 students and 2,353 teachers completed voluntary, anonymous online surveys that measured perceptions of school climate and safety conditions. Ninth grade was chosen as the target grade because it is the first year of high school and has the highest rate of discipline problems. In future studies we can examine this cohort's adjustment through high school.

School Safety Measures

1. **Aggressive Discipline Violations** – Rate of disciplinary violations for aggressive behavior in grades 9-12 of each high school. Aggressive behavior is defined as any incident classified in school records as assault, fighting, physical altercation, bullying, threatening, or carrying a weapon, but not including less aggressive behavior such as insubordination, defiance, disorderly conduct, or obscene language. Total incidents for 2006-07 school year were divided into total school enrollment in grades 9-12 to obtain an annual rate.
2. **Student and Teacher Victimization** – Total of eight items used as a standard measure of victimization in previous research, including being physically attacked (seriously or not seriously injured), being threatened verbally or with a weapon, being spoken to in a rude or obscene manner, theft or damage to personal property.
3. **Student and Teacher Perceptions of Bullying** – Total of seven items used to measure perceptions that bullying is a problem, new students are not made to feel welcome, students from different neighborhoods do not get along, and students are often teased about their appearance or sexual topics, put down because of their race or ethnicity, or not accepted for who they are.

Caveats

This is a correlational study that can suggest, but not prove, the existence of causal relationships. Measures of victimization and bullying are based only on the reports of randomly selected groups of ninth grade students and ninth grade teachers, whose perceptions may not match those of others in the school. The rates of aggressive disciplinary violations are schoolwide measures based on all grades. There are additional findings and results controlling for school demographics in the complete presentation and related papers.

The Virginia High School Safety Study was carried out by Dewey Cornell, Anne Gregory, Xitao Fan, and Peter Sheras of the Curry School of Education, University of Virginia. Contact Dr. Cornell at dcornell@virginia.edu. We thank graduate research assistants Sharmila Bandyopadhyay, Megan Eliot, Talisha Lee, Erica Shirley, and Aisha Thompson, who are co-authors for several of the reports summarized in this document. We also thank graduate research assistants Justin Collman, Francis Huang, Jennie Klein, Tse-Hua Shih, and Farah Williams. We thank Chris Gist for development of the GIS map that permitted us to align U.S. census poverty data and law enforcement crime data with school districts. We thank James Conklin for his painstaking efforts to acquire crime data from Virginia law enforcement agencies. We thank Donna Bowman of the Virginia Center for School Safety of the Department of Criminal Justice Services and Arlene Cundiff of the Virginia Department of Education. The Virginia High School Safety Study was funded by the U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, but the views in this presentation do not necessarily reflect policies or recommendations of the funder. For more information: <http://youthviolence.edschool.virginia.edu/high_school_safety/studyhome.html>