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Violent School Crime Falls Over 10 Years

By CURT ANDERSON
Associated Press Writer

WASHINGTON - Violent crime against students in schools fell by 50 percent between 1992 and 2002, with young people more often targeted for violence away from school.

There were about 24 crimes of rape, sexual assault, robbery and physical assault for every 1,000 students in 2002, down from 48 per 1,000 a decade earlier, according to a report Monday from the Education and Justice departments.

The reduction mirrored the trend found outside classrooms - overall crime is at a 30-year low across the nation.

The report found instances of school violence involving students have dropped steadily since a string of fatal shootings in the 1990s, notably the 1999 killings of 13 people at Columbine High School in Colorado by two heavily armed students.

"There has been a drop, and we attribute a lot of that to the fact that schools are focusing on the issue more," said William Lassiter, school safety specialist at the Center for the Prevention of School Violence in Raleigh , N.C.

Schools have taken a number of steps, from installing metal detectors and hiring more security personnel to implementing programs aimed at curbing bullying, which can lead to more serious crimes. A recent analysis of more than 200 studies show that school-based violence prevention programs reduce school violence by up to 50 percent, said Dewey Cornell, director of the Virginia Youth Violence Project at the University of Virginia .

"Prevention programs have been quietly successful but tend to get overlooked. If you have one fight at school, it gets a lot of attention," Cornell said.

Others say the scope of the problem is underreported by the federal study, which relies on limited surveys and self-reporting instead of tracking actual reported crimes. In addition, the data

used is already outdated, said Kenneth Trump, president of National School Safety and Security Services, a consulting firm.

"To tell the American public that school crime is dramatically declining based upon underreported, outdated and limited data is misleading and creates a false sense of security," Trump said.

The report found students are more apt to be victims of violence outside schools.

In 2002, there were about 659,000 violent crimes involving students at school and about 720,000 away from school property. For the most serious nonfatal violent crimes - rape, assault and robbery - the crime rates were lower in school than away from school every year from 1992 to 2002.

The report also found that, in each school year between 1992 and 2000, students between 5 and 19 were at least 70 times as likely to be murdered away from school than on campus. There were 234 homicides at school during that time span, compared with more than 24,000 away from school.

"There was initially great concern about school violence, but our report shows that kids are safer at school than they are away from school," said the report's co-author, Katrina Baum of the Bureau of Justice Statistics.

Overall in 1992 there were more than 3.4 million crimes in school against students between 12 and 18, the report estimated. That included more than 2.2 million thefts - by far the most common serious crime in school - and over 1.1 million violent crimes.

By 2002, the report found the total number had dropped to 1.7 million crimes: just over 1 million thefts and about 659,000 violent crimes.

Teachers are also targets of schoolhouse crime. The report found that from 1998 through 2002 teachers were victims of an annual average of 233,900 crimes at school, more than 90,000 of them violent. That translates to an annual rate of 51 crimes per 1,000 teachers.

The report shows that inner-city teachers are more than twice as likely to be victims of violent crimes than those in suburban or rural school districts, and that male teachers are more often attacked than female teachers. The report does not give year-to-year comparisons because the sample sizes studied are too small, Baum said.

Other findings in the report:

- In 2003, 22 percent of students in grades 9-12 reported using marijuana during the preceding 30 days. That compares with 18 percent in 1993 and 27 percent in 1999.

- About 45 percent of high school students in 2003 said they had at least one alcoholic drink in the 30 days before they were surveyed, about the same as in 1993 and down from a recent high of 52 percent in 1995.
- A third of students in grades 9-12 said that someone had offered, given or sold them an illegal drug on school property in 2003. That number has essentially remained the same over the past decade.
- About 21 percent of students in 2003 said that street gangs were active in their schools, most often in urban districts.

On the Net:

Justice Department: <http://www.usdoj.gov>

Education Department: <http://www.ed.gov>

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