
**Student Perceptions of School Safety:
Results of the 2001 Omnibus Survey**



Safe Schools
Healthy Students

Pinellas County School District
Safe Schools/Healthy Students Initiative
Evaluation Report #207-4
Prepared by the Louis de la Parte Florida Mental Health Institute

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Safe Schools/Healthy Students Initiative**

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Executive Summary

Student Perceptions of School Safety: Results of the 2001 Omnibus Survey

Pinellas County, Florida began the Omnibus project in 1989 to collect data about students from kindergarten to graduation. The Pinellas County Safe Schools/Healthy Students Initiative evaluation team submitted questions about student perceptions of school safety to the Omnibus committee for addition to the 2001 survey.

Omnibus surveys were completed by 2413 students from fifteen Pinellas County high schools. Participation in the study was voluntary.

In section one of the survey, students reported the frequency with which they witnessed or experienced events in school. Bullying and teasing were reported most often with over 40% of students witnessing or experiencing teasing or bullying on a daily basis. Verbal threats were experienced or witnessed at least once per week by 39.5% of students. Additionally, more than 35% of students experienced or witnessed discrimination at least once per week.

Weapons and gang activity in school were reported with low frequency. More than 60% of students reported never having seen nor taking part in gang activity in school. More than 50% of students reported never having seen a weapon in their school and 48% of students reported never having seen drugs sold in their school.

A statistical analysis of the items in section one by sex revealed that male students reported seeing or experiencing acts of violence or aggression significantly more often than female students. For example, significantly more male students reported seeing or experiencing physical violence, weapons being brought to school, gang activity in school, and verbal threats in school than female students.

A statistical analysis of the items in section one by ethnicity revealed that white students reported witnessing or experiencing acts of violence or aggression significantly more often than minority students. In particular, white students reported witnessing or experiencing significantly higher numbers of verbal threats, incidents of teasing and bullying, and physically violent acts in school than minority students.

Reports of the incidents of crime and violence in each of the Pinellas County High Schools (Florida Department of Education, 2001) were compared with student perceptions of school violence for each question in section one. Student perceptions of violence in the schools did not correspond with the reported incidence of violence for schools in 2001. These results suggest that official estimates of school violence may be lower than that experienced by students.

Section two was designed to assess student opinion of the effectiveness of school violence prevention strategies. Students reported that controlling guns in school, having counselors to help students in school, and keeping drugs out of school would be the most effective strategies to help keep their school safe. According to students, putting more security devices in schools and training students in conflict resolution and anger management are the least effective violence prevention strategies in schools.

Student Perceptions of School Safety: Results of the 2001 Omnibus Survey

Introduction

Pinellas County, Florida began the Omnibus project in 1989 to collect data from students from kindergarten to graduation. The project began with 8,268 children when they registered for kindergarten. Information was collected about the students from parents each year from 1990 to 1998 except for 1996. Information was collected from teachers each year from 1990 until 1996. Students filled out the Omnibus surveys in 1992, from 1994 to 1999, and in 2001. Students are expected to complete a final Omnibus survey in 2002.

A Pinellas County Schools committee determined survey questions each year. Information obtained from Omnibus surveys has been used for several purposes including early identification of educational failure, tracking high-risk student progress, nutrition and school performance, and child health practices.

The Pinellas County Safe Schools/Healthy Students Initiative evaluation team submitted questions about student perceptions of school safety to the Omnibus committee as an addition to the survey. The school safety questions were developed based on Pinellas County Schools disciplinary referral categories. The questions compliment items on the School Safety Survey developed by the evaluation team to examine school staff perceptions of school safety.

Three sections of school safety questions were added to the 2001 Omnibus. In section one, students reported the frequency with which they witnessed or experienced violent or aggressive events in school. Students were asked to record how often they

witnessed or experienced 11 items on a five-point scale from “never” to “daily.” Section one included items such as “verbal threats in school” and “students bringing weapons to school.”

In section two, students were asked to rate the effectiveness of violence prevention strategies in their schools. Students rated 13 strategies on a five-point scale from “very effective” to “very ineffective.” Sample items included: “suspending/expelling students who commit acts of violence” and “training teachers to resolve conflicts.”

In section three, students were asked to rate their level of agreement with the application of school rules. Students rated their level of agreement with five statements including “principals apply rules fairly” and “some students are getting away with too much.” Students rated their level of agreement on a five-point scale ranging from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree.”

Methods

Participants

The 2413 participants included 1238 females and 1158 males from fifteen Pinellas County High Schools (see Table 1). Seventy-seven percent of the participants were White, 14 percent were Black, 4 percent Hispanic, 4 percent Asian, and American Indian and Multi-Ethnic participants comprised the remaining percent. Eighty-six percent of participants were in the eleventh grade, while 12.5% of the sample were in the tenth grade. Less than one percent of participants were in the ninth or twelfth grades.

Table 1

Response Rate by School

School Names	N	Percent of Total Sample
Boca Ciega High School	26	1.1
Clearwater High School	241	10.0
Countryside High School	188	7.8
Dixie Hollins High School	94	3.9
Dunedin High School	264	10.9
East Lake High School	284	11.8
Gibbs High School	213	8.8
Lakewood High School	228	9.4
Largo High School	22	.9
Northeast High School	83	3.4
Osceola High School	107	4.4
Palm Harbor University High	207	8.6
School Pinellas Park High School	149	6.2
St. Petersburg High School	197	8.2
Tarpon Springs High School	93	3.9

Procedure

Eleventh grade students were given the survey to fill out during school hours. Surveys were also distributed to students in the original cohort who had been promoted or retained since kindergarten. Participation in the study was voluntary and participants were assured that the information provided was confidential and would be reported as group data with no individual student information.

Results

In section one, students reported the frequency with which they witnessed or experienced events in school (see Table 2). Bullying and teasing was reported most often with over 40% of students witnessing or experiencing teasing or bullying on a daily basis. Verbal threats were experienced or witnessed at least once per week by 39.5% of students. Additionally, more than 35% of students experienced or witnessed discrimination at least once per week.

Table 2
Percent Witnessing or Experiencing Violent or Aggressive Acts

Items	Never	1 or 2 times per year	1 or 2 times per month	1 or 2 times per week	Daily
Verbal threats in school	21.3	22.0	17.1	16.9	22.6
Physical violence in school	18.5	31.3	29.2	13.3	7.7
Students bringing weapons to school	57.1	30.9	6.4	1.6	3.9
Students using drugs or alcohol in school	29.9	22.6	16.4	11.7	19.4
Drugs being sold at school	48.0	19.9	13.1	9.1	9.9
Teasing or bullying in school	14.0	12.7	14.1	16.8	42.4
Gang activity in school	62.5	18.2	8.3	4.4	6.6
Personal property stolen or destroyed in school	19.9	31.5	23.4	13.5	11.8
Vandalism of school property	22.4	31.8	20.1	10.3	15.4
Discrimination at school	23.2	23.2	18.3	11.8	23.6
Violence in the community where your school is located	35.8	28.0	18.2	8.5	9.5

Weapons and gang activity in school were reported with low frequency. More than 60% of students reported never seeing or taking part in gang activity in school.

More than 50% of students reported never bringing a weapon or seeing another student bring a weapon to school. In addition, 48% of students reported never seeing drugs sold in their school.

A chi square analysis is used to identify the significance of association between two variables. For purposes of analysis, students were split into two groups for each question in section one: 1) students that reported seeing or experiencing an item frequently (once a month or more) and 2) students that saw or experienced an item rarely or never (2 times a year or less).

A chi square analysis of these items and sex revealed that males reported seeing or experiencing acts of violence or aggression significantly more often than females (see Table 3).

Table 3

Chi Square Results of Violent or Aggressive Acts and Sex

Items	N	Pearson Chi-Square Value	df	Significance
Verbal threats in school	2376	24.765 *	1	.000
Physical violence in school	2375	18.427 *	1	.000
Students bringing weapons to school	2363	30.256 *	1	.000
Students using drugs or alcohol in school	2371	2.216	1	.137
Drugs being sold at school	2365	23.907 *	1	.000
Teasing or bullying in school	2363	1.917	1	.166
Gang activity in school	2363	45.125 *	1	.000
Personal property stolen or destroyed in school	2368	29.320 *	1	.000
Vandalism of school property	2362	17.147 *	1	.000
Discrimination at school	2367	3.262	1	.071
Violence in the community where your school is located	2369	15.384 *	1	.000

* = significant at the .01 level.

For example, males reported seeing or experiencing physical violence, weapons being brought to school, gang activity in school, and verbal threats in school significantly more often than females. Only three of the items were not significant at the .01 level.

A chi square analysis of the items and ethnicity revealed that white students reported witnessing or experiencing acts of violence or aggression significantly more often than other students (see Table 4). Differences were significant for nine of the eleven items. In particular, white students reported witnessing or experiencing significantly higher numbers of verbal threats, incidents of teasing and bullying, and physically violent acts in school than other students.

Table 4

Chi Square Results of Violent or Aggressive Acts and Ethnicity

Items	N	Pearson Chi-Square Value	df	Significance
Verbal threats in school	2376	25.032 **	1	.000
Physical violence in school	2375	9.854 **	1	.002
Students bringing weapons to school	2363	.254	1	.614
Students using drugs or alcohol in school	2371	17.755 **	1	.000
Drugs being sold at school	2365	18.418**	1	.000
Teasing or bullying in school	2363	47.482 **	1	.000
Gang activity in school	2363	.378	1	.539
Personal property stolen or destroyed in school	2368	7.909 **	1	.005
Vandalism of school property	2362	8.600 **	1	.003
Discrimination at school	2367	4.298 *	1	.038
Violence in the community where your school is located	2369	7.414 **	1	.006

* = significant at the .05 level

** = significant at the .01 level

Next, reports of the total incidence of crime and violence in each of the Pinellas County High Schools (Florida Department of Education, 2001) were compared with student perceptions of school violence for each question in section one (see Table 5). Results indicate that student perceptions of violence in the schools did not correspond with the incidence of violence reported by the schools. Students in schools with relatively higher rates of reported violence did not indicate any greater frequency of any category of violence than those reporting relatively low rates of violence. These results suggest that the experience of violence from the students' perspectives is not a reflection of official reports of violence.

Table 5

School Reports of Crime and Violence and Mean Student Perceptions of School Violence

High School	Reported Incidents of Crime and Violence	Verbal Threats	Physical Violence	Bringing Weapons	Using Drugs	Drugs Sold	Teasing Bullying	Gang Activity	Property Stolen	Vandalism	Discrimination	Community Violence
1	125	3.2	2.73	1.8	2.73	2.22	3.64	1.88	2.83	2.69	2.91	2.1
2	117	3	2.55	1.68	2.23	1.77	3.33	1.86	2.5	2.33	2.14	1.82
3	112	3	3	1.88	3.19	2.58	4	1.5	3.08	3.04	3.42	2.65
4	77	2.76	2.17	1.6	2.55	1.89	3.4	1.53	2.56	2.46	2.63	2.09
5	72	2.84	2.81	1.56	2.68	2.28	3.58	1.91	2.83	2.79	2.93	2.23
6	70	3.1	2.65	1.92	2.88	1.92	3.82	1.82	2.58	2.55	3	2.24
7	65	3.31	3.02	1.74	3.07	2.3	4.03	2.06	2.92	3	3.27	2.39
8	63	3.33	3.2	1.75	2.73	2.33	3.88	1.68	2.88	2.73	3.07	2.4
9	57	2.71	2.39	1.31	2.36	1.82	3.45	1.52	2.28	2.34	2.57	1.86
10	49	2.92	2.62	1.52	2.33	1.97	3.46	1.79	2.67	2.59	2.79	2.34
11	41	3.03	2.51	1.54	2.66	2.25	3.53	1.63	2.49	2.59	2.76	2.06
12	40	2.97	2.63	1.6	2.78	2.12	3.47	1.67	2.6	2.87	2.88	2.64
13	24	2.51	2.4	1.59	2.84	2.25	3.27	1.59	2.58	2.6	2.77	2.35
14	19	2.93	2.41	1.47	2.67	2.28	3.77	1.56	2.58	2.45	2.73	2.17
15	18	2.91	2.52	1.78	2.55	2.34	3.44	1.9	2.73	2.71	3.19	2.59

Section two of the survey was designed to assess student opinion of the effectiveness of school violence prevention strategies (see Table 6). Students reported that controlling guns in school, having counselors to help students in school, and keeping drugs out of school would be the most effective strategies to help keep their schools safe. According to students, putting more security devices in schools and training students in conflict resolution and anger management are the least effective violence prevention strategies in schools.

Table 6
Perceived Effectiveness of Violence Prevention Strategies by Percent

Items	Very Effective	Effective	Unsure	Ineffective	Very Ineffective
Suspending/expelling students who commit acts of violence	16.0	33.9	23.9	17.1	9.0
Putting more security devices in schools	12.1	30.8	29.1	18.2	9.8
Having more school resource officers	11.7	35.2	28.9	15.8	8.4
Training students in conflict resolution and anger management	8.9	25.9	35.1	19.4	10.7
Bringing drugs/weapon sniffing dogs to school	14.2	36.7	25.1	14.3	9.6
Training students to resolve conflicts	10.2	29.4	33.4	18.3	8.8
Training teachers to resolve conflicts	11.4	32.7	32.7	14.8	8.4
Training teachers to accept differences in others	14.5	32.5	30.3	14.7	8.0
Keeping drugs out of school	20.3	32.1	22.9	14.8	9.9
Having counselors to help students in school	16.4	36.9	28.8	11.4	6.5
Controlling guns in school	35.2	33.3	21.3	5.7	4.4
Involving more parents with school	13.3	27.2	35.7	15.3	8.5
Leadership training for students	13.5	28.4	37.6	13.0	7.6

In section three, students reported their level of agreement with the application school disciplinary practices as they related to safety (see Table 7). Responses to the five statements showed few differences, with a nearly equal number of students agreeing and disagreeing with each of the statements. Students agreed most with the statements: “Troublemakers should be suspended or expelled” and “Some students are getting away with too much.” Students had less favorable responses to the statements regarding the fairness of rules. Students disagreed most strongly with the statement: “I can depend on my teachers to keep school safe,” with over 40% disagreeing or strongly disagreeing.

Results of this section of the survey suggest that while students believe that student discipline of some form is needed, they do not necessarily think that the rules as currently applied are fair. Future analyses will link disciplinary referral data to the frequency of witnessing or experiencing violence and also to student agreement with the application of school discipline.

Table 7

Percent Agreement with Disciplinary Policies

Items	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
The rules for punishing students are fair	7.2	25.5	28.0	24.2	15.1
Principals apply rules fairly	5.6	23.6	31.4	24.4	14.9
Troublemakers should be suspended or expelled	17.6	30.0	30.3	14.8	7.4
Some students are getting away with too much	27.5	32.0	24.0	11.1	5.4
I can depend on my teachers to keep my school safe	3.6	16.1	39.1	22.2	19.0

The Pinellas County Safe schools/Healthy Students Initiative evaluation team will conduct focus groups with high school students emphasizing experiences of school safety in the spring. These focus groups may contribute additional detailed information about student experiences in their schools, their perceptions of effective strategies to make schools safer, and their observations about school policies and discipline measures dealing with school safety.

References

Florida Department of Education (2001). *Florida school indicators report*. Retrieved December 11, 2001 from http://info.doe.state.fl.us/fsir2001/school_report.cfm.

How much do you agree with the following statements?

Strongly Disagree

Disagree

Neither Agree nor Disagree

Agree

Strongly Agree

1. The rules for punishing students are fair
2. Principals apply discipline rules fairly
3. Troublemakers should be suspended or expelled
4. Some students are getting away with too much
5. I can depend on my teachers to keep my school safe