

New Study Examines School Violence

By James P. Lukes

School-associated violent deaths are rare. However, a new study has found that there may be some common characteristics of these events that can help us to understand the causes and learn how to reduce future incidents. The study, undertaken jointly by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the U.S. Departments of Education and Justice, was published in the December 5, 2001 issue of the *Journal of the American Medical Association*.ⁱ One particularly troubling finding was that while the number of incidents involving school-related violent deaths decreased during the period from 1994 to 1999, the number of deaths per incident increased during that same period.

The study reported that the number of incidents involving violent deaths dropped by forty-three percent from the 1992-93 school year to 1998-1999. However, the number of incidents with multiple fatalities increased in that same period. While there were no such incidents in 1992-93, by the 1998-99 school year, forty-two percent of all incidents of violent school-associated deaths involved more than one victim.

One of the factors cited by the study for the decrease in the number of incidents was the successful implementation of school and community-based programs designed to specifically reduce school violence. Such programs target behaviors like bullying and teach children to pursue nonviolent solutions to their problems. The study showed that the majority of the incidents of school-related violent deaths occurred in small towns or rural areas, places that were thought to be insulated from this type of “big-city” violence, and which generally do not have these kinds of violence-control programs in place.

The study also showed that in more than half of the incidents, there was some kind of

warning that preceded the event. These warnings included threats, notes, journal entries, arguments, and fights. The researchers suggested that teaching educators, parents, and fellow students to pay closer attention to these kinds of warnings could serve to dramatically reduce violent deaths. The study also noted that individuals engaging in this type of violence were seven times more likely to have expressed some kind of suicidal behavior prior to the event and that homicides followed by suicides, or isolated suicides, made up nearly one out of every five of the cases examined.

While the number of incidents resulting in death decreased, the number of multiple-death incidents increased sufficiently to make the overall number of deaths increase between 1994 and 1999. This is at least partly due to school-aged children having increased access to firearms, particularly semi-automatic and automatic weapons which are capable of transforming an attack directed at a specific individual into a massacre involving numerous victims. Dr. Mark Anderson, an epidemiologist with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and one of the report's authors, recommends limiting access to these kinds of weapons by school-aged children as one way to reduce the number of school-related deaths.

The report noted that school-associated deaths are only a small fraction of the total number of homicides and suicides that occur every year involving minor victims; less than 1.3% of homicides and .3% of suicides among children ages five to eighteen. While this shows that schools are relatively safe places to be, these figures do not reflect the kind of trauma that such incidents can inflict when they do occur.

i. Mark Anderson, M.D., M.P.H., *et al*, *School-Associated Violent Deaths in the United States, 1994-1999*, J. AM. MED. ASS'N, Vol. 286, No. 21, Dec. 5, 2001, at 2695.