



# National Institute of Justice

## Research Preview

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# Crime in the Schools: A Problem-Solving Approach

*Summary of a Presentation by Dennis Kenney, Police Executive Research Forum*

School crime and violence is an issue often discussed, yet rarely fully understood. Existing research, which indicates that incidents of school crime have been increasing somewhat since the early 1980s, is affected by problems inherent in the reporting method chosen, definitional discrepancies, and the lack of comparable measures. That research—along with a great deal of rhetoric and images from the popular media—has long guided policies for addressing school crime.

However, current research is studying school crime issues more effectively and accurately. One such research project, sponsored by the National Institute of Justice (NIJ), centered its efforts on student-level problem solving. The School Safety Program was incorporated into a social studies class curriculum in one high school in Charlotte, North Carolina, during the 1994–95 school year. A second high school in the city with similar characteristics, including demographics, academic performance, discipline rates, and teacher experience, was selected as a control.

According to student surveys, fear levels and crime incidents decreased at the test school over the project year while remaining steady or increasing slightly at the control school. Classroom conditions at the test school improved as well; by the end of the year, the number of teachers reporting that they spent a majority of their time dealing with disruptive students was half that at the start of the project year.

## The School Safety Program

Designed to bring together students, teachers, administrators, and the police to focus on and identify the

school's problems and to develop effective responses, the School Safety Program had three major components: regular meetings among faculty, administrators, and the police; problem-solving classes for the students; and regular reviews by the police and teachers to identify problem students. At the project's center was the problem-solving curriculum developed by teachers and research staff and integrated into a social studies course required of all 11th-grade students.

The curriculum was based on the SARA (scanning, analysis, response, and assessment) problem-solving model and was designed to be student driven, with teachers serving mainly as mentors and facilitators. Students identified and prioritized problems through open class discussions, then analyzed the problems using a variety of information-gathering methods. Next, they formulated responses and brainstormed solutions using the information previously collected. Finally, the students evaluated their action plans.

Researchers began collecting data at the end of the school year preceding the project year, when the students involved in the project were completing the 10th grade. The second and third waves of data collection occurred just before the Christmas break and the end of the school year. Data collected included information from student and teacher surveys, school disciplinary records, and police reports on crime and calls for service.

## A practical example

As students looked at school problems, fighting and disorder in the lunchroom was the issue mentioned most frequently. Analyzing the situation, the students

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determined that the root of the problem was that nearly the entire school population—between 1,000 and 1,500 students—was released for lunch at the same time. The lunchroom had only two serving lines, and the meals were typically split between salad and some other entree, such as pizza or hamburgers. Since more students preferred the second item over salad, students arriving late would often cut into the long lines, causing fights to break out.

The students proposed several solutions, such as establishing an open campus policy (an option rejected by the administration) or inviting other food vendors onto the campus (which would have violated the school board's exclusive contract with the lunch vendor). As a third option, students met with lunchroom workers, who agreed to open additional serving lines and decrease the ratio of salads to other entrees served. The plan was successful, and most of the lunchroom fighting stopped.

## Project impact: A reduction in fear

Researchers found that as the school year progressed, levels of fear reported by students dropped significantly. At the beginning of the project, just over half of the students reported that they were almost never afraid of being hurt or bothered at school. By the second wave of data collection, nearly 70 percent said they were almost never afraid; by the end of the project year, the number was nearly 75 percent. At the control school, 70 percent of students reported at the beginning of the project year that they were almost never afraid—a rate that remained unchanged throughout the year.

Additionally, actual incidents of violence appeared to decline at the test school. At the start of the project, 1 in 5 students reported being involved in a fight during the current school term; at the end of the project year, 1 in 10 did. Over the same period, the number of students who reported seeing a teacher threatened declined by about one-third (51 percent to 34 percent). At the control school, student fighting increased from 16 percent reporting having been involved in a fight at the beginning of the project year to 18 percent at the project's end. Similarly, the number of students reporting having witnessed a teacher being threatened by a student increased from 53 percent to 58 percent at the control school.

Police calls for service also declined at the test school. At the project's start, the number of calls for service was about equal between the project school and the control school. During the project year, incidents at the control school increased slightly, while the project school experienced a 50-percent reduction, mainly in assault-related behaviors. In addition, disciplinary actions at the project school dropped by 23 percent. (Comparable disciplinary data were not available for the control school.)

The study found positive, though limited, effects among faculty members: Teachers reported substantial declines in incidents of vandalism; theft; and obscene threats, gestures, and comments. However, the project did not appear to affect teachers' feelings of safety in their classrooms. Eight percent reported that they did not feel safe in their own classrooms at the beginning of the project year; 4 percent felt so at the end of the year. At the control school, teachers reporting feeling unsafe in their own classrooms increased from 9 percent to 11 percent during the same time period. In neither the test school nor the control school, however, were the differences statistically significant.

Even so, the project appeared to have some positive effects on classroom conditions. At the start of the project year, 22 percent of teachers reported that they spent at least half of their time dealing with disruptive students. By the end of the project, only 11 percent said they spent that much time with disruptive students. In addition, 45 percent of teachers reported at the project's start that they hesitated at times before approaching disruptive students; this figure decreased to 28 percent by the project's end. Meanwhile, at the control school, no significant change was observed in the time spent dealing with disruptive students, while the proportion of teachers who reported hesitating to confront such students increased from 25 percent to 38 percent during the project year.

## Conclusions

Researchers reached the following conclusions about the School Safety Program:

- Student empowerment and total freedom are not the same. A problem-solving approach to school issues demonstrates that those who have the most to gain—students—should be full partners in identifying, explaining, and developing responses to problems.
- The most significant problems in schools are not necessarily issues popularly considered to be important. Although gangs and drugs may receive the most media attention, most of the conflicts discussed during this project were related to everyday school interactions. As studies have shown in other community settings, little things do matter.
- Students are interested in a safer, more orderly school environment. Teachers and project observers were surprised by and consistently impressed with the level of student involvement in the problem-solving efforts.
- The School Safety Program was implemented in a receptive school environment. Researchers underscored the need for replication—in different school settings, in different areas of the country, under different circumstances, with different personnel, and so on—to determine the project's potential for positive change.

This document is based on Dr. Dennis Kenney's presentation to an audience of researchers and criminal justice practitioners as part of NIJ's Research in Progress seminar series. The study was sponsored by NIJ (grant number 93-IJ-CX-0026). Dr. Kenney is Research Director at the Police Executive Research Forum. A 60-minute VHS videotape of the seminar, *Crime in the Schools: A Problem-Solving Approach*, is available for \$19 (\$24 in Canada and other countries). Ask for NCJ 167882. Use the order form below to obtain this videotape and any of the other tapes now available in the series.

Points of view in this document do not necessarily reflect the official position of the U.S. Department of Justice.

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