

SPECIAL REPORT

THE SAFETY OF SCHOOL CHILDREN IN ARKANSAS

**Arkansas Advocates
for Children & Families**

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Key Findings:

- Students who carried a weapon onto school property decreased from 12% in 1997 to 10% in 1999.
- Expulsions for carrying a firearm on school property increased by 16% between 1997-98 and 1998-99.
- Arkansas' rate (15%) of fighting on school property is comparable to the national rate (14.8%).

The school shooting in Jonesboro in March 1998 put Arkansas at the epicenter of the school safety debate. As high profile school shootings continue to haunt the country, parents wonder about the safety of their children and the impact school violence has on their children's academic success.

This report is intended to help parents and others understand how school safety is monitored in Arkansas. It will present what Arkansas students are saying about their access to weapons and involvement in aggressive behavior. It will summarize and highlight information gathered from surveys and reports on schools in Arkansas; it will look for trends in data; and it will identify state and federal resources with more information about school safety.

The Arkansas Department of Education collects data on

school safety from the Arkansas Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS), a survey of students conducted every other year. Sixty-three schools and 2,296 students were selected to participate in the YRBS; 76 percent of those schools agreed to participate. Therefore, 1,991 9th- to 12th-grade students from 48 schools participated in the 1997 survey. In this report, Arkansas' YRBS survey results will also be compared to national results from 1997.

Data is also available from the 1998 "Communities That Care" survey conducted by the Arkansas Department of Health Bureau of Alcohol and Drug Abuse Prevention. More than 12,000 6th-, 8th-, 10th- and 12th-graders from randomly-selected schools participated in this survey. The findings from the 1999 "Communities That Care" survey are still preliminary, and because of changes in format and reporting, do not allow for yearly comparisons or trend analysis.

ARKANSAS YRBS RESULTS ON WEAPONS

Students Who Carried a Weapon* on 1 or More of the Past 30 Days

	TOTAL	9 th Grade	10 th Grade	11 th Grade	12 th Grade
1995	26%				
1997	28%	30%	27%	28%	24%
1999	23%	25%	24%	25%	18%

* Such as gun, knife or club

Students Who Carried a Weapon on School Property 1 or More of the Past 30 Days

	TOTAL	9 th Grade	10 th Grade	11 th Grade	12 th Grade
1995	11%				
1997	12%	11%	11%	13%	13%
1999	10%	9%	12%	12%	8%

Students Who Carried a Gun on 1 or More of the Past 30 Days

	TOTAL	9 th Grade	10 th Grade	11 th Grade	12 th Grade
1995	11%				
1997	11%	12%	11%	10%	10%
1999	9%	10%	9%	9%	7%

Students Who Were Threatened or Injured by a Weapon on School Property 1 or More Times During the Last 12 Months

	TOTAL	9 th Grade	10 th Grade	11 th Grade	12 th Grade
1995	9%				
1997	8%	11%	8%	8%	6%
1999	10%	11%	10%	9%	8%

Fighting, carrying a weapon and gang involvement are all problem behaviors associated with threats to personal and school safety, future injury and death. Student surveys often ask about specific violent and delinquent behavior. In Arkansas' surveys, students were specifically asked how many times in the past year, if any, they had

- taken a handgun to school,
- attacked someone with the idea of seriously hurting them, or
- carried a handgun somewhere other than to school.

Any of these activities indicate participation in violent behavior. Students who possess weapons, are involved in acts of violence, or have underlying aggressive tendencies are the major focus in these surveys as indicators of a student's potential for school violence.

WEAPONS

Perhaps the most frightening aspect of school safety is students' access to deadly weapons (gun, knife, club) both on and off the school grounds.

The trend in student weapon possession seems to be decreasing slightly in Arkansas, as reflected in the YRBS. However, **the percent of students who carried a weapon in Arkansas was 28 percent, compared to the national average of 18.3 percent.** Nationwide, 5.9 percent of students carried a gun, compared to 11 percent in Arkansas. Nationwide, the prevalence of weapon carrying on school

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION S REPORT ON FIREARMS IN SCHOOLS								
	HANDGUNS		RIFLES/SHOTGUNS		OTHER FIREARMS		TOTAL	
	'97	'98	'97	'98	'97	'98	'97	'98
Elementary	1	3	0	0	3	2	4	5
Junior High	20	25	1	2	1	3	22	30
Senior High	23	25	5	5	3	1	31	31
TOTAL	44	53	6	7	7	6	57	66

COMMUNITIES THAT CARE RESULTS ON WEAPONS

QUESTION: Think of your 4 best friends. In the past year, how many have carried a handgun?

	6 th Grade	8 th Grade	10 th Grade	12 th Grade
None	90.3%	87.4%	85.3%	81.9%
1-4	6.7%	10.6%	13.6%	17%
# Surveyed	2,087	1,773	1,785	1,545

QUESTION: How many times in the past year have you carried a handgun?

	6 th Grade	8 th Grade	10 th Grade	12 th Grade
None	88.7%	90.1%	90.4%	88.1%
1 or more	8.4%	8.8%	9%	10.1%
# Surveyed	2,093	1,787	1,793	1,535

QUESTION: How many times in the past year have you taken a handgun to school?

	6 th Grade	8 th Grade	10 th Grade	12 th Grade
None	96%	96.3%	96.6%	93.2%
1 or more	1%	1.3%	1.8%	3.1%
# Surveyed	2,101	1,786	1,791	1,535

property was 8.5 percent, compared to 12 percent in Arkansas. However, in Arkansas, 8 percent of students reported being threatened or injured with a weapon on school property, much like the nationwide reported figure of 7.4 percent.

Another indicator of weapon possession at school is revealed in the number of students expelled for bringing firearms to school in Arkansas. As a part of the U.S. Department of Education's Safe and Drug Free Schools effort, the Arkansas Department of Education Office of Comprehensive Health Education is required to file annual reports on firearms in the school. According to this report, the number of total expulsions for carrying a firearm increased by 16 percent between the 1997-98 and 1998-99 school years. State law requires that students who bring firearms to school be expelled for one year. However, on a case-by-case basis, the chief administrative officer of the school district may modify the length of expulsion. In the

1997-98 school year, 16 of the 57 cases (28%) were shortened expulsions. School administrators are becoming stricter with expulsions involving firearms: in 1998-99, only 11 of the 66 cases (17%) were shortened.

FIGHTING

While the potential for school violence resulting in death or serious injury is clearly influenced by access to deadly weapons, the amount of fighting that occurs in school or in a student's life is a barometer of the potential for serious violence. Numerous survey questions addressed the involvement of students in fights and their beliefs about the use of violence to resolve interpersonal problems.

YRBS survey results indicated that fighting is decreasing slightly, and as students mature into secondary schools, they are less likely to fight. Arkansas' overall rate of physical fighting on school property (15%) is comparable

ARKANSAS YRBS RESULTS ON FIGHTING

Students Who Were in a Physical Fight 1 or More Times in the Past 12 Months

	TOTAL	9 th Grade	10 th Grade	11 th Grade	12 th Grade
1995	38%				
1997	36%	43%	36%	35%	30%
1999	33%	41%	35%	29%	24%

Students Who Were in a Physical Fight on School Property 1 or More Times in the Past 12 Months

	TOTAL	9 th Grade	10 th Grade	11 th Grade	12 th Grade
1995	17%				
1997	15%	22%	15%	13%	8%
1999	16%	21%	16%	14%	9%

COMMUNITIES THAT CARE RESULTS ON FIGHTING

QUESTION: How Many Times in the Past Year Have You Attacked Someone with the Idea of Seriously Hurting Them?

	6 th Grade	8 th Grade	10 th Grade	12 th Grade
None	82.9%	81%	79.1%	78.2%
1-2	8.5%	11.5%	12.9%	10.6%
3 or more	6%	6.3%	7.1%	9%
# Surveyed	2,097	1,786	1,788	1,532

REALITY vs. PUBLIC PERCEPTION: Data and Poll Results in Context

THE REALITY

40%

The decrease in school-associated violent deaths between 1997-98 and 1998-99.

1 in 2 Million

The chance that a school-aged child will die in a school in 1998-99.

56%

The decline in juvenile homicide arrests between 1993 and 1998.

4%

The portion of juvenile homicides that occur in rural areas.

THE PUBLIC'S PERCEPTION

49%

The increase in poll respondents who fear a school shooting in their community (1998-99).

71%

The portion of poll respondents who thought a school shooting was "likely" to happen in their community.

62%

The portion of poll respondents who believe that juvenile crime is on the increase.

1st

The rank rural parents give "fear for their children's safety" in polls.

Source: "School House Hype: Two Years Later," Juvenile Policy Institute.

to the nationwide rate of 14.8 percent. Nevertheless, survey results in Arkansas seem to contradict the notion that older students are less likely to fight, with the 12th-grade students being just as likely to attack someone.

Taken together, the survey information and data give mixed signals about school violence. The decreases in violent incidences in Arkansas range from only 1 percent to 5 percent and are a reflection of what is going on at a national level. Indicators from student surveys suggest that Arkansas schools are only slightly safer places than they were in 1995. The 15 percent increase in the number of students expelled for bringing firearms to schools is either an indication of increased firearm possession or improved monitoring and reporting within Arkansas schools.

The whole issue of school violence must also be put into a larger perspective. The rate of juvenile violent crime and school-associated violent deaths and the number of fights and gun possession in schools nationwide have decreased. However, a disconnect exists between what is perceived to be going on in schools and the emerging trends toward reductions in school violence

Although rare, school violence continues to alarm parents. The Arkansas student survey data alone should make parents worry and has made school violence a cause of major concern for the state's policymakers. During recent years, Arkansas has received more than \$15 million in additional federal funds for "Safe School" initiatives in the Jonesboro and Little Rock areas. The activities of the Little

Rock Safe School Initiative include:

- four centers serving suspended students (120 daily);
- neighborhood associations to monitor student travel, conflict resolution and conflict management training;
- treatment for students with substance-abuse problems;
- school-based care for students with mental health problems;
- middle school teachers trained to identify students with mental health needs;
- prenatal care for pregnant adolescents;
- parenting education for teen parents; and
- a home-visitor model program for teen parents.

The Jonesboro Safe School Initiative also includes a wide variety of efforts to reduce school violence. Some of these efforts involve:

- modifying and re-designing physical plant structures to control access;
- enhancing security measures at schools and bus stops, and on busses;
- drug- and alcohol-prevention intramural programs;
- violence prevention training;
- alternative school;

- mental health services;
- education and day care for at-risk children of teen parents;
- summer in-home services;
- teacher training; and
- development of policies and procedures.

Both of these school-based programs utilize outside evaluations to measure the effectiveness of their efforts.

In addition to these two local initiatives, more than \$3 million in Safe and Drug Free Schools federal funds is provided to local school districts to reduce drug use and school violence. These funds are primarily spent on teaching curriculum and materials used by all local school districts. All of these resources are an indication of the concern for school violence and the extent of work being done to prevent another school shooting like what occurred in Jonesboro.

The schools are often the repository of the unresolved problems confronted by youth everyday in their community. Parents can help encourage partnerships between community service organizations and local schools to better address some of these problems. Parents

are also encouraged to contact their local school or the Arkansas Health or Education departments to ensure that their school participates in these student surveys as a way to document and monitor student behaviors and attitudes related to school violence. With two major safe school initiatives now underway in Arkansas, it will be important for other Arkansas schools to learn from the evaluation of these programs and to duplicate effective methods for reducing school violence. The tragedy of Jonesboro in 1998 must serve as an enduring “wake-up call” to all parents and concerned citizens to identify and address problems before they erupt again and shatter our notion that schools are safe places where our children will learn and grow.

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RESOURCES

U.S. Department of Education
Office of Elementary and Secondary Education
Safe and Drug-Free Schools Program
400 Maryland Avenue SW
Washington, D.C. 20202-6123
Phone: (202) 260-3954.
E-mail: safeschc@ed.gov
Web site: www.ed.gov/offices/OESE/SDFS

The Center for Policy Alternatives is partnering with the Applied Research Center’s Grass Roots Innovative Policy Program (GRIPP).
Center for Policy Alternatives
1875 Connecticut Avenue NW, Suite 710
Washington, DC 20009
Phone: (202) 387-6030
Fax: (202) 986-2539.
Web site: www.cfpa.org

Justice Policy Institute www.cjcj.org/schoolhouse

Indicators of School Crime and Safety, 1998
<http://nces.ed.gov>

School Violence Resource Center www.svrc.net

Fight Crime: Invest in Kids
Phone: (202) 776-0027
E-mail: info@fightcrime.org.

“School-Associated Violent Deaths in the United States, 1992 to 1994.” Journal of the American Medical Association 275 (22) (1996) 1729-1733.

Surveys Available From:

Arkansas Youth Risk Behavior Survey
Arkansas Department of Education
Office of Comprehensive School Health
2020 West 3rd, Suite 320
Little Rock, AR. 72205
(501) 324-9743

“Communities That Care”
Arkansas Department of Health
Bureau of Alcohol and Drug Abuse Prevention
Freeway Medical Center
5800 West 10th, Suite 907
Little Rock, Arkansas 72204
(505) 280-4500