

National Study of Delinquency Prevention in Schools

Chapter 2 The Nature of Problem Behavior in Schools

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The Nature of Problem Behavior in Schools

In this chapter we describe the amount of problem behavior that occurs in schools, what form it takes, and how it is distributed. We first describe the amount of crime according to principal reports. Second, the nature, amount, and distribution of classroom disorder and personal victimization according to teacher reports is described. Third, student reports are examined for an account of student delinquent behavior, drug use, and personal victimization. Then the reports of both teachers and students of their perceptions of school safety are described. Finally, the information developed in the National Study of Delinquency Prevention in Schools (NSDPS) is compared with information developed in different ways, and we call attention to the variability in school safety that produces relatively higher levels of delinquency and disorder in some schools serving urban middle school aged youths.

How Much Problem Behavior Occurs?

In nationally representative surveys, the NSDPS estimated the amount of problem behavior that occurs in schools by asking principals, teachers, and students to report on problem behavior, victimization, and school disorder.

Principal Reports

One way of estimating the amount of delinquent behavior occurring in schools is to ask principals about it. In the NSDPS survey of principals in the spring of 1998 we asked respondents to tell us how many crimes of various types had been reported to law enforcement representatives during the 1997-98 school year. The percentages of schools reporting at least one incident for each of five crime categories are displayed in Table 2.1. Nationwide, 6.7% of schools or an estimated 6,451 schools reported at least one incident of physical attack or fight with weapon to law enforcement personnel during the year. Some schools reported more than one such incident, so an estimated 20,285 fights or attacks with a weapon were reported to authorities according to our survey.¹

A small percentage (2.2%) of elementary schools reported fights or attacks involving a weapon, for an estimated 2,801 such incidents in elementary schools. Fights or attacks with weapons are most common in middle schools – 21.0% of middle/junior high schools reported

¹Table 2.1 provides a summary of the more detailed information tabulated in Appendix H. The appendix tables provide estimated numbers of incidents and numbers of schools with incidents. Unless otherwise noted, tables in the main body of this report are adjusted for non-response and weighted to represent all schools, teachers, principals, or students in the nation. Standard errors or confidence intervals presented are calculated using a re-sampling method (the jackknife) to account for the complex sample design employed.

Table 2.1

Percentage of Schools In Which One or More Incidents of Crime Was Reported to Law Enforcement – 1997-98 School Year

Group	Physical attack or fight with a weapon		Robbery		Physical attack or fight without a weapon		Theft or larceny		Vandalism	
	%	SE	%	SE	%	SE	%	SE	%	SE
All schools	6.7	.9	5.9	.9	44.2	2.4	44.4	2.4	49.2	2.4
Level										
Elementary	2.2	1.0	2.8	1.0	34.2	3.3	34.7	3.3	39.3	3.4
Middle/Junior	21.0	2.8	16.7	2.4	71.8	3.4	67.0	3.5	67.8	3.5
High	10.6	2.2	8.5	2.1	55.5	4.1	57.7	4.1	65.1	4.0
Location										
Rural	4.7	1.2	3.1	1.0	40.1	3.6	44.1	3.7	46.8	3.7
Suburban	7.4	1.6	9.8	2.5	44.8	4.4	42.6	4.2	53.3	4.4
Urban	9.4	2.1	7.4	1.6	50.9	4.7	46.7	4.6	49.6	4.7
Auspices										
Public	8.5	1.2	7.3	1.1	50.3	2.7	50.0	2.6	56.1	2.6
Private or Catholic	.0	– ^a	1.0	.7	20.6	4.8	23.9	4.9	24.1	4.9

^a No incident of physical attack or fight with a weapon was observed in the small ($n = 94$) number of private or Catholic schools in the sample.

these incidents, for an estimated 7,576 incidents. The percentage of high schools² reporting a physical attack or fight involving a weapon (10.6%) is lower than the percentage for middle schools, but there were more such incidents per school reporting at least one incident so that the estimated number of fights or attacks with a weapon reported is 9,909. The percentages of schools reporting a fight or attack with a weapon do not differ significantly by location.

Robbery shows a similar pattern, with 5.9% of all schools reporting at least one robbery. A much higher percentage of middle schools reported at least one robbery than did elementary schools. A higher percentage of high schools than elementary schools reported at least one robbery (the percentages of middle and high schools reporting at least one robbery are not significantly different). A smaller percentage of rural schools than other schools reported robberies.

Physical attacks without a weapon, theft or larceny, and vandalism are much more common in schools than are the more serious incidents. Forty-four percent to 49% of all schools reported crimes of these types to the authorities. The percentages were again highest for middle schools, although the percentages of middle and high schools reporting at least one incident of vandalism to the police were about the same. Because 72% of middle schools reported at least one attack or fight without a weapon, it is fair to say that some fighting is typical of middle schools.

The percentages of nonpublic (Catholic or other private) schools in which at least one incident was reported to law enforcement personnel are lower than the percentages of public schools for each of the five crimes examined. Private and Catholic schools tend to be smaller than public schools.³ The percentages reported in Table 2.1 do not standardize rates for population size.

An alternative way to describe the distribution of school crime in schools at different levels and locations is to form a composite measure that combines reports about all of the crimes about which we inquired. Table 2.2 shows such results for a scale composed of principal reports of the

²High schools include all schools serving the highest grade levels. Some of these are comprehensive schools serving students in grades K-12. Others are vocational schools. More details of the sample descriptions are provided in Appendix A.

³Based on principal reports in PQ1 enrollments are as follows: Public $M = 572$, $Mdn = 500$, range = 6 - 4482; Private $M = 186$, $Mdn = 115$, range = 4 - 1780; Catholic $M = 383$, $Mdn = 297$, range = 100 - 1310.

Table 2.2

Means and Standard Deviations for School Crime and Gang Problem Scales from the Phase 2 Principal Questionnaire by School Level and Location

Location		Elementary		Middle/Junior		High		Total	
		Value	95% CI	Value	95% CI	Value	95% CI	Value	95% CI
School crime ^a									
Rural	M	47.6	46.3-48.8	52.8	50.6-55.1	50.9	48.8-53.1	49.2	48.2-50.2
	SD	5.5		10.0		8.9		7.6	
	<i>n</i>	79		75		75		229	
Suburban	M	49.4	46.0-52.7	56.6	53.8-59.4	50.9	47.9-54.0	50.7	48.4-53.0
	SD	13.3		11.0		11.1		12.8	
	<i>n</i>	65		63		47		175	
Urban	M	47.5	46.4-48.6	62.4	57.2-67.5	55.4	51.9-58.8	50.7	49.3-52.0
	SD	4.5		20.2		11.7		10.7	
	<i>n</i>	64		61		45		170	
Total	M	48.0	46.9-49.1	56.3	54.4-58.2	51.8	50.2-53.4	50.0	49.2-50.8
	SD	8.2		14.1		10.1		10.0	
	<i>N</i>	208		199		167		574	
School crime, trimmed scores ^a									
Rural	M	47.6	46.3-48.8	52.4	50.5-54.4	50.7	48.8-52.6	49.1	48.2-50.1
	SD	5.5		8.4		8.0		7.0	
	<i>n</i>	79		75		75		229	
Suburban	M	48.4	46.6-50.2	56.4	53.7-59.1	50.4	47.9-52.9	49.9	48.6-51.3
	SD	7.0		10.4		9.1		8.5	
	<i>n</i>	65		63		47		175	
Urban	M	47.5	46.4-48.6	59.0	55.9-62.0	55.1	51.8-58.3	50.2	49.0-51.4
	SD	4.5		11.9		10.9		8.4	
	<i>n</i>	64		61		45		170	
Total	M	47.8	47.0-48.5	55.2	53.8-56.6	51.5	50.1-52.9	49.6	49.0-50.3
	SD	5.7		10.3		9.0		7.8	
	<i>N</i>	208		199		167		574	

continued . . .

Table 2.2 (continued)

Means and Standard Deviations for School Crime and Gang Problem Scales from the Phase 2 Principal Questionnaire by School Level and Location

Location	Elementary		Middle/Junior		High		Total		
	Value	95% CI	Value	95% CI	Value	95% CI	Value	95% CI	
Gang problems in school and community ^b									
Rural	M	46.4	44.8-47.9	47.9	45.7-50.2	47.1	45.0-49.1	46.8	45.6-47.9
	SD	7.2		10.0		9.3		8.3	
	<i>n</i>	79		80		80		239	
Suburban	M	49.8	47.5-52.2	50.0	47.4-52.6	51.3	48.5-54.0	50.2	48.5-51.8
	SD	9.7		10.2		10.3		9.9	
	<i>n</i>	68		71		58		197	
Urban	M	54.8	52.3-57.3	55.4	52.5-58.2	57.0	53.6-60.3	55.2	53.4-57.1
	SD	9.6		11.8		12.0		10.4	
	<i>n</i>	68		69		51		188	
Total	M	49.9	48.6-51.2	50.4	49.0-51.9	50.0	48.4-51.5	50.0	49.1-50.9
	SD	9.4		11.0		10.8		10.0	
	<i>N</i>	215		220		189		624	

Notes. 95% CI = 95% confidence interval for the M. For trimmed scores, no score is allowed outside the range 50 ± 30 .

^a Mean score for each level differs from every other level, $p < .01$.

^b Mean score for each location differs from every other location, $p < .01$.

number of incidents reported of each type.⁴ The scales are displayed in a T-score metric, where the mean is 50 for the nation's schools and the standard deviation is 10. When displayed in this way, it is apparent that the mean crime score for urban middle/junior high schools is over a standard deviation above the mean for all schools (T-score = 62.4). Furthermore, the table shows that the standard deviation of T-scores for urban middle schools is very large (20.2) compared to the standard deviation for all schools. This implies that some urban middle schools report a great deal of crime to the police and that there is great variability in the scores for urban middle schools. The relatively high crime scores for urban middle/junior high schools is not due only to a few extremely high scoring schools. The second panel in Table 2.2 shows that when T-scores are trimmed so that no score is allowed to be above 80, the mean for urban middle/junior high schools is still almost a standard deviation above the mean for all schools.

Principals were asked about gang problems in the school and community, and T-scores for a scale composed of their responses to two questions about gangs is shown in the bottom panel of Table 2.2. Urban principals report more gang problems than do suburban or rural schools, and suburban schools report more problems than do rural schools (note that the confidence intervals do not overlap).

We are circumspect about placing too much credence in the principal reports of school crime for four reasons. First, principals naturally want to present their schools in a good light and it is only to be expected that many principals will be reluctant to notify the police when a crime – particularly one that they may regard as minor – occurs in their school because of the negative image of the school that this may promote. According to the National Crime Victimization Survey (Whitaker & Bastian, 1991), only 9% of violent crimes against teenagers occurring in school were reported to the police compared with 37% of such crimes occurring on the streets. This same reluctance may influence their reports in a survey. Second, in our experience working in schools over the past decades, we have observed that some schools report only a small fraction of incidents involving fights or attacks, alarm pulls, thefts, and vandalism to the police. We are confident, therefore, that in a non-trivial proportion of schools, many or most categories of crime are under-reported. Third, the principal reports show only modest convergence with other measures of school disorder in the present research (see Appendix Table G-1) and in prior research (G. Gottfredson & Gottfredson, 1985). Fourth, principal reports are the reports of a single individual so that individual differences in reporting tendency are confounded with the measurement of crime and error is expected to be greater than if there were several persons reporting about the school. Accordingly, the reports of teachers, reported next, and of students are of interest.

⁴The number of crimes of each type is log transformed and standardized (with respect to item variances) before being combined to form a scale. Results for untrimmed scores are shown in the top panel of Table 2.2, and results for scores that are trimmed to ± 3 standard deviations from the mean are shown in the second panel of the table. Scores are *not* standardized with respect to enrollment size. Elementary schools tend to enroll fewer students than secondary schools; and enrollments tend to be higher in urban and suburban schools than in rural schools.

Teacher Reports

In secondary schools, teachers were asked to report about their own experiences of victimization in the school, about their views on the safety of the school, and about classroom disorder.

The percentages of teachers reporting each of several kinds of victimization in school are shown in Table 2.3. Many teachers – 42% overall – report having received obscene remarks and gestures from a student; 28% experienced damage to personal property worth less than \$10; 24% had property worth less than \$10 stolen; 21% were threatened by a student; 14% experienced damage to personal property worth more than \$10; 13% had property worth more than \$10 stolen; 3% were physically attacked. Less than 1% of teachers reported having been physically attacked and having to see a doctor or having had a weapon pulled on them.

Victimization rates are higher in middle schools than in high schools for obscene remarks and gestures, minor property damage, minor theft, threats, minor physical attacks, and physical attacks requiring physician attention. For all secondary schools, the urban victimization rates are higher than the rural rates for threats, serious attack, minor theft, minor attack, major theft, obscene remarks, and major property damage. The urban rates are higher than the suburban rates for serious attack, minor theft, major theft, minor property damage, minor attack, major property damage, threats and obscene remarks. Estimates of the numbers of teacher victimized are found in Appendix Tables H2.6 through H2.10. Because so many teachers work in the nation's schools, even small percentages translate into a large number of teachers victimized. For example, although we estimate that 7.9 per 1000 teachers was attacked and had to visit a doctor, the number of teachers estimated to have been so victimized is about 12,100 in the 1997-98 school year.

Secondary school teachers were also asked to report about classroom disorder and the conduct of students in their schools. Table 2.4 shows that 27% of teachers report that student behavior keeps them from teaching a fair amount or a great deal. Misconduct that interferes with teaching is more common in middle schools than in high schools, and it is more common in urban schools than in suburban or rural schools. Reports of other forms of student misconduct are shown in Appendix Table H2.11.

Student Reports

In participating secondary schools, students were asked to report about their own participation in a variety of kinds of delinquent behavior and drug use. Interpersonal violence is common in middle schools. Table 2.5 shows that 32% of high school students and 41% of middle school students reported having hit or threatened to hit other students in the past year. Damaging or destroying school property is also relatively common, with about 16% of students reporting having engaged in this behavior. Whereas middle school students reported interpersonal violence more often than high school students, this pattern was reversed for going to school when drunk or high on drugs: 9% of middle school students and 17% of high school

Table 2.3

Percentage of Teachers Reporting Personal Victimization This Year in School, by School Level and Location

Type of victimization and location	Middle/Junior ^b			High ^c			Total ^d		
	%	95% CI	<i>n</i>	%	95% CI	<i>n</i>	%	95% CI	<i>N</i>
Received obscene remarks or gestures from a student ^a									
Rural	45	41-49	2138	39	34-44	1728	40	37-44	3866
Suburban	38	33-44	2729	41	35-48	1911	40	36-44	4640
Urban	56	52-60	2530	42	36-47	2258	47	43-51	4788
Total	46	43-48	7397	40	37-43	5897	42	40-44	13294
Damage to personal property worth less than \$10.00 ^a									
Rural	28	26-31	2139	27	24-29	1728	27	25-29	3867
Suburban	29	26-32	2728	23	20-26	1909	26	24-28	4639
Urban	35	33-38	2532	26	24-29	2256	30	28-32	4788
Total	31	29-32	7399	26	24-27	5895	28	26-29	13294
Theft of personal property worth less than \$10.00 ^a									
Rural	27	25-30	2133	21	19-24	1727	23	21-25	3860
Suburban	25	21-28	2726	21	18-24	1909	23	20-25	4635
Urban	33	30-36	2527	23	20-26	2257	27	25-29	4784
Total	28	26-30	7386	22	20-23	5893	24	23-25	13279

continued . . .

Table 2.3 (continued)

Percentage of Teachers Reporting Personal Victimization This Year in School, by School Level and Location

Type of victimization and location	Middle/Junior ^b			High ^c			Total ^d		
	%	95% CI	<i>n</i>	%	95% CI	<i>n</i>	%	95% CI	<i>N</i>
Was threatened in remarks by a student ^a									
Rural	22	19-25	2136	18	15-21	1729	19	17-22	3865
Suburban	19	15-23	2728	21	16-25	1913	20	17-23	4641
Urban	31	27-36	2531	23	19-27	2258	26	23-29	4789
Total	24	22-26	7395	20	18-22	5900	21	20-23	13295
Damage to personal property worth more than \$10.00									
Rural	13	11-15	2139	12	10-14	1728	12	11-14	3867
Suburban	13	11-15	2730	13	10-15	1913	13	11-14	4643
Urban	18	16-20	2533	16	14-19	2260	17	15-19	4793
Total	14	13-16	7402	14	12-15	5901	14	13-15	13303
Theft of personal property worth more than \$10.00									
Rural	11	9-14	2139	11	9-13	1727	11	10-13	3866
Suburban	10	8-12	2728	14	11-16	1911	12	11-14	4639
Urban	17	15-19	2532	16	13-19	2258	16	14-18	4790
Total	13	11-14	7399	13	12-14	5896	13	12-14	13295

continued . . .

Table 2.3 (continued)

Percentage of Teachers Reporting Personal Victimization This Year in School, by School Level and Location

Type of victimization and location	Middle/Junior ^b			High ^c			Total ^d		
	%	95% CI	<i>n</i>	%	95% CI	<i>n</i>	%	95% CI	<i>N</i>
Was physically attacked but not seriously enough to see a doctor ^a									
Rural	3.1	2.36-4.03	2138	1.8	1.18-2.57	1727	2.2	1.66-2.76	3865
Suburban	2.5	1.58-3.58	2730	2.3	1.58-3.25	1910	2.4	1.81-3.07	4640
Urban	6.7	5.31-8.28	2530	3.1	2.20-4.18	2257	4.5	3.85-5.40	4787
Total	4.0	3.34-4.67	7398	2.3	1.83-2.79	5894	2.9	2.52-3.31	13292
Was physically attacked and had to see a doctor ^a									
Rural	.7	.36-1.20	2139	.4	.18- .80	1729	.5	.28- .76	3868
Suburban	.7	.46-1.16	2728	.7	.40-1.26	1913	.7	.49-1.05	4641
Urban	2.1	1.40-2.89	2531	.8	.52-1.35	2258	1.3	.96-1.74	4789
Total	1.1	.85-1.44	7398	.6	.43- .84	5900	.8	.63- .97	13298
Had a weapon pulled on me									
Rural	.4	.23- .82	2139	.7	.34-1.20	1728	.6	.34- .96	3867
Suburban	.3	.15- .61	2728	.4	.14- .80	1913	.3	.18- .58	4641
Urban	.7	.43-1.10	2532	.7	.35-1.22	2260	.7	.44-1.02	4792
Total	.5	.34- .65	7399	.6	.39- .87	5901	.6	.40- .73	13300

Note. 95% CI = 95% confidence interval. *N* = unweighted number of responses.

^a Victimization rate is significantly ($p < .02$) higher in middle/junior high schools than in high schools.

^b For middle/junior high schools, the urban rate is significantly ($p < .01$) higher than the rural rate for all items except having a weapon pulled. For middle/junior high schools none of the rural-suburban differences are significant.

^c For high schools, the urban rate is significantly ($p < .02$) higher than the rural rate for damage to property worth more than \$10, theft of property worth more than \$10.

^d For both levels combined, the urban rate is significantly ($p < .02$) higher than the rural rate for threats, serious attacks, minor theft, obscene remarks, minor attack, major theft, and major property damage. The urban rate is significantly ($p < .02$) higher than the suburban rate for all items except having a weapon pulled.

Table 2.4

Percentage of Teachers Reporting That the Behavior of Some Students in Their Classroom (Talking, Fighting, etc.) Keeps Them from Teaching a Fair Amount or a Great Deal, by School Category

	Percentage	95% CI	<i>n</i>
All schools ^{a, b}	27	25.7 - 29.1	13197
Level			
Middle/Junior	34	31.5 - 36.5	7351
High	24	21.5 - 25.9	5846
Location			
Rural	25	22.4 - 27.5	3848
Suburban	27	23.8 - 30.6	4597
Urban	31	28.1 - 34.5	4752

Note. Percentage = weighted percentage. *n* = unweighted *n*. 95% CI = 95% confidence interval.

^a Percentage differs significantly ($p < .001$) for school level.

^b Percentage for urban schools differs significantly from rural schools ($p < .01$).

students reported having done so. Only 9% of students report having engaged in theft, and about 5% having hit or threatened to hit a teacher.

Students were also asked to report on their experiences of personal victimization, and these reports are summarized in Table 2.6. The most common form of victimization experienced by students according to these reports is minor theft (of items worth less than \$1), with 47% of students reporting such theft in the present school year. A larger percentage of middle school students (54%) than of high school students (44%) reported experiencing a minor theft. Victimization by theft of items worth more than \$1 was also reported by a higher percentage of middle school students (49%) than of high school students (42%).

Almost one in five students reported being threatened with a beating, and again this was a more common experience for middle school students (22%) than for high school students (16%). Victimization by physical attack was reported by 19% of middle school students and 10% of high school students. Having things taken by force or threat of force was also more common for middle school students than high school students. About 5% of secondary students report having been threatened with a knife or gun. Percentages of students reporting theft or attack in the last month are roughly half the percentages reporting theft or attack this year in school (see Appendix Table H2.12).

Table 2.5

Percentage of Students Reporting Personal Participation in School Delinquency and Drug Use in Past Year, by School Level and Location

Self-reported behavior and location	Middle/Junior			High			Total		
	%	95% CI	<i>n</i>	%	95% CI	<i>n</i>	%	95% CI	<i>N</i>
Purposely damaged or destroyed property belonging to a school ^a									
Rural	14.3	12.4-16.1	3531	16.1	13.4-18.8	3459	15.6	13.6-17.5	6990
Suburban	17.5	15.4-19.5	2892	14.7	12.2-17.2	2011	15.9	14.2-17.6	4903
Urban	16.6	14.5-18.8	2801	15.5	11.8-19.2	1269	15.8	13.3-18.4	4070
Total	16.2	15.0-17.4	9224	15.5	13.8-17.2	6739	15.8	14.6-17.0	15963
Hit or threatened to hit a <u>teacher</u> or other adult in school ^{b, c, d, e, f}									
Rural	5.1	3.9-6.2	3534	5.4	3.9-7.0	3460	5.3	4.2-6.5	6994
Suburban	4.0	2.9-5.1	2904	3.6	2.3-4.8	2011	3.8	2.9-4.6	4915
Urban	7.8	6.0-9.6	2802	4.3	2.4-6.2	1273	5.5	4.0-7.0	4075
Total	5.6	4.8-6.4	9240	4.6	3.6-5.5	6744	4.9	4.2-5.6	15984
Hit or threatened to hit other <u>students</u> ^{g, h, i}									
Rural	43.1	40.1-46.1	3527	36.4	33.2-39.7	3456	38.4	35.8-41.0	6983
Suburban	39.4	36.2-42.6	2891	27.4	23.6-31.2	2008	32.4	29.4-35.5	4899
Urban	40.8	37.4-44.1	2796	31.5	26.6-36.5	1273	34.6	30.7-38.4	4069
Total	41.0	39.1-42.8	9214	32.3	29.9-34.7	6737	35.3	33.5-37.1	15951
Stolen or tried to steal something at school, such as someone's coat from a classroom, locker, or cafeteria, or a book from the library									
Rural	8.1	6.7- 9.4	3532	9.3	7.5-11.0	3457	8.9	7.6-10.2	6989
Suburban	10.0	8.6-11.4	2900	7.7	5.9- 9.5	2008	8.7	7.4- 9.9	4908
Urban	9.3	8.1-10.6	2802	9.2	7.9-10.5	1273	9.2	8.3-10.2	4075
Total	9.2	8.4-10.0	9234	8.8	7.9- 9.8	6738	9.0	8.3- 9.6	15972

continued . . .

Table 2.5 (continued)

Percentage of Students Reporting Personal Participation in School Delinquency and Drug Use in Past Year, by School Level and Location

Self-reported behavior and location	Middle/Junior			High			Total		
	%	95% CI	<i>n</i>	%	95% CI	<i>n</i>	%	95% CI	<i>N</i>
Gone to school when drunk or high on some drugs ^{a, h, j, k, l}									
Rural	10.4	8.4-12.3	3528	16.4	13.3-19.6	3456	14.6	12.4-16.9	6984
Suburban	7.7	6.2- 9.2	2900	16.0	12.6-19.2	2009	12.4	10.5-14.4	4909
Urban	10.5	8.3-12.6	2795	19.1	14.8-23.4	1273	16.3	13.3-19.2	4068
Total	9.4	8.3-10.5	9223	17.2	15.2-19.3	6738	14.5	13.1-16.0	15961

Note. 95% CI = 95% confidence interval for weighted percentages. *N* = unweighted number of respondents.

^a Rural middle schools differ from suburban middle schools, $p < .05$.

^b Rural high schools differ from urban middle schools, $p < .05$.

^c Suburban high schools differ from urban middle schools, $p < .01$.

^d Urban high schools differ from urban middle schools, $p < .01$.

^e Rural middle schools differ from urban middle schools, $p < .05$.

^f Suburban middle schools differ from urban middle schools, $p < .01$.

^g Rural high schools differ from suburban high schools and rural middle schools, $p < .01$.

^h Suburban high schools differ from rural middle, suburban middle, and urban middle schools, $p < .01$.

ⁱ Urban high schools differ from rural middle schools, urban middle schools, $p < .01$.

^j Rural high schools differ from rural middle schools, suburban middle schools, and urban middle schools, $p < .01$.

^k Suburban high schools differ from rural middle schools, suburban middle schools, and urban middle schools, $p < .01$.

^l Suburban middle schools differ from urban middle schools, $p < .05$.

Table 2.6

Percentage of Students Reporting Personal Victimization This Year in School, by School Level and Location

Type of victimization and location	Middle/Junior			High			Total		
	%	95% CI	<i>n</i>	%	95% CI	<i>n</i>	%	95% CI	<i>N</i>
Theft, less than \$1 ^{a, b, c, d}									
Rural	54.6	51.7-57.4	3535	47.4	44.3-50.6	3461	49.6	47.1-52.1	6996
Suburban	55.1	52.4-57.8	2905	41.5	38.2-44.9	2012	47.3	44.6-50.0	4917
Urban	52.9	50.5-55.3	2807	41.5	35.8-47.2	1273	45.2	40.9-49.6	4080
Total	54.2	52.7-55.8	9247	43.8	41.2-46.3	6746	47.4	45.5-49.3	15993
Theft, \$1 or more ^{b, c, d, e}									
Rural	48.6	45.7-51.5	3532	42.9	40.5-45.2	3463	44.6	42.7-46.5	6995
Suburban	47.9	45.5-50.4	2904	39.7	36.3-43.1	2012	43.2	40.8-45.5	4916
Urban	51.4	48.9-53.9	2806	43.2	38.8-47.6	1272	45.9	42.7-49.1	4078
Total	49.3	47.8-50.8	9242	42.1	40.2-44.1	6747	44.6	43.2-46.0	15989
Threatened with a beating ^{c, f, g}									
Rural	22.8	20.9-24.7	3536	17.6	15.3-19.9	3464	19.1	17.4-20.9	7000
Suburban	21.6	19.6-23.5	2904	13.0	10.4-15.6	2014	16.6	14.6-18.6	4918
Urban	21.9	20.0-23.9	2809	17.3	13.4-21.3	1272	18.8	16.0-21.6	4081
Total	22.1	21.0-23.2	9249	16.3	14.5-18.0	6750	18.3	17.0-19.5	15999
Physical attack ^{b, c, d}									
Rural	18.0	16.4-19.6	3532	8.9	7.0-10.8	3464	11.6	9.9-13.3	6996
Suburban	19.6	17.6-21.7	2899	9.0	6.9-11.1	2015	13.5	11.5-15.5	4914
Urban	19.3	17.1-21.6	2804	11.6	9.2-13.9	1273	14.1	12.2-16.1	4077
Total	19.0	17.9-20.2	9235	9.9	8.6-11.1	6752	13.0	12.0-14.1	15987
Robbery, less than \$1 ^{h, i, j, k, l}									
Rural	6.2	5.1-7.3	3538	3.3	2.3-4.4	3465	4.2	3.4-5.0	7003
Suburban	5.0	4.1-6.0	2907	3.4	2.1-4.8	2013	4.1	3.2-5.0	4920
Urban	6.7	5.7-7.7	2809	3.7	2.5-4.9	1273	4.7	3.7-5.7	4082
Total	6.0	5.4-6.5	9254	3.5	2.8-4.2	6751	4.3	3.8-4.8	16005

continued . . .

Table 2.6 (continued)

Percentage of Students Reporting Personal Victimization This Year in School, by School Level and Location

Type of victimization and location	Middle/Junior			High			Total		
	%	95% CI	<i>n</i>	%	95% CI	<i>n</i>	%	95% CI	<i>N</i>
Robbery, \$1 or more ^{h, i, j, k, l, m, n}									
Rural	8.2	6.6-9.7	3536	4.4	3.2-5.6	3464	5.5	4.5-6.5	7000
Suburban	6.3	5.0-7.6	2906	4.4	3.2-5.7	2013	5.2	4.3-6.2	4919
Urban	9.2	8.0-10.3	2809	4.4	2.7-6.0	1273	6.0	4.6-7.3	4082
Total	7.8	7.0-8.6	9251	4.4	3.6-5.2	6750	5.6	5.0-6.2	16001
Threatened with a knife or gun ^{n, o}									
Rural	5.2	4.3-6.2	3534	4.9	3.7-6.2	3464	5.0	4.1-6.0	6998
Suburban	4.1	3.1-5.0	2903	4.0	2.6-5.4	2014	4.1	3.2-4.9	4917
Urban	6.0	5.1-7.0	2810	5.0	2.6-7.3	1274	5.3	3.7-7.0	4084
Total	5.1	4.5-5.6	9247	4.7	3.7-5.7	6752	4.8	4.2-5.5	15999

Note. 95% CI = 95% confidence interval.

^a Rural high schools differ from suburban high schools, $p < .05$.

^b Rural high schools differ from rural middle schools, suburban middle schools, and urban middle schools, $p < .01$.

^c Suburban high schools differ from rural middle schools, suburban middle schools, and urban middle schools, $p < .01$.

^d Urban high schools differ from rural middle schools, suburban middle schools, and urban middle schools, $p < .01$.

^e Urban high schools differ from rural middle schools, $p < .05$.

^f Rural high schools differ from suburban high schools, rural middle schools, suburban middle schools, and urban middle schools, $p < .01$.

^g Urban high schools differ from rural middle schools and urban middle schools, $p < .05$.

^h Rural high schools differ from rural middle schools and urban middle schools, $p < .01$.

ⁱ Rural high schools differ from suburban middle schools, $p < .05$.

^j Suburban high schools differ rural middle schools and urban middle schools, $p < .01$.

^k Urban high schools differ form rural middle schools and urban middle schools, $p < .01$.

^l Suburban middle schools differ from urban middle schools, $p < .02$.

^m Suburban high schools differ from suburban middle schools, $p < .05$.

ⁿ Suburban middle schools differ from urban middle schools, $p < .01$.

^o Suburban high schools differ from urban middle schools, $p < .03$.

How Safe Are Secondary Schools?

In addition to asking principals about specific instances of crimes reported to law enforcement representatives and about teachers' and students' personal experiences, questionnaires asked secondary school teachers and students about their perceptions of school safety and about exposure to violence. This section summarizes their reports about safety and exposure to violence. It is important that schools not only be safe, but that people feel safe and not fearful in schools.

Teacher Perceptions

Secondary teachers usually reported that most places in their schools were fairly safe, although perceptions of safety differed according to specific location, as Table 2.7 shows. Teachers generally rate their classroom while teaching as safe (a rating of 3.4 on a 4-point scale where 3 = fairly safe and 4 = very safe). Other places in the school are generally seen as less safe than classrooms during instruction. Locker room or gym and restrooms used by students received the lowest ratings for safety (both at 2.7 of the 4-point scale, where 2 = average and 3 = fairly safe). Appendix Table H2.13 provides details of the perceived safety of specific locations within schools by school level and location.

An alternative way to describe the distribution of orderliness, victimization, and safety in schools at different levels and locations is to form composite scales that combine reports for multiple items. Results for such scales are displayed in a T-score metric – where the mean is 50 for the nation's schools and the standard deviation is 10 – are shown in Appendix Table H2.14. The mean score for classroom orderliness for urban middle/junior high schools is a standard deviation below the mean for all schools (T-score = 40.0). The mean score for victimization for urban middle schools is over four fifths of a standard deviation above the mean for all school (T-score = 58.5); and the mean score for safety for urban middle schools is also somewhat low (T-score = 44.3). Middle schools are seen to be less orderly and to be characterized by more victimization than are high schools according to the results shown in Table H2.14.

Student Perceptions and Exposure to Violence

One way of ascertaining whether students feel safe in school is to ask them if there are specific places that they avoid because someone might hurt or bother them there. The percentages of students who would avoid each of seven locations in their schools and two locations in their neighborhoods are shown in Table 2.8. About 11% of students say they would avoid certain places on school grounds, and 11% say they would avoid school restrooms. In general, about a tenth of students say they would avoid the places in school we asked about. About a tenth of students also say that they would avoid being outside on the street where they live. A larger percentage (16%) would avoid some other place in their neighborhood.

There are often large differences in perceptions of safety for students of different race/ethnic groups. Students who identified a racial/ethnic identity other than White tend to avoid more places in school and their neighborhood than do White students. Details are shown in Appendix

Table 2.7

Mean Teacher Reports of Safety from Vandalism, Personal Attacks, and Thefts, in Specific School Locations

Location	Mean	95% CI	N
Your classroom while teaching	3.4	3.41 - 3.48	13038
The cafeteria	3.0	2.97 - 3.07	12571
Empty classrooms	3.0	2.96 - 3.05	12665
Hallways and stairs	2.9	2.87 - 2.97	12894
Parking lot	2.8	2.80 - 2.91	12842
Elsewhere outside on school grounds	2.8	2.78 - 2.88	12851
Locker room or gym	2.7	2.65 - 2.76	11420
The restrooms used by students	2.7	2.61 - 2.74	12807

Note. Mean = weighted mean. *N* = unweighted number of respondents. 95% CI = 95% confidence interval. Teachers rated the safety of places on the following scale: 0 = very unsafe, 1 = fairly unsafe, 2 = average, 3 = fairly safe, 4 = very safe.

Table H2.15. For example, 15% of Black students, 11% of Asian or Pacific Islander students, 9% of American Indian or Alaskan Native Students, 11% of other non-Hispanic students, and 11% of Latino students⁵ say they would avoid certain entrances into the school, but only 6% of White students indicate that they would avoid an entrance. Although the number of students identifying themselves as Asian or Pacific Islanders or as American Indians or Alaskan Natives is relatively small, the reported tendency to avoid certain places is sometimes statistically significantly higher than the tendency reported by Whites. Racial/ethnic minority students also tend to report avoiding places in their neighborhoods more often than do White students.

Middle school students avoid places in school because someone might hurt or bother them considerably in considerably higher percentage than do high school students. For example 11% of middle school students versus 7% of high school students avoid an entrance into the school, 11% of middle school versus 7% of high school students avoid parts of the school cafeteria, 14% of middle school and 9% of high school students avoid school restrooms. Middle school students also report avoiding places on the street where they live and elsewhere in their neighborhoods in higher percentages than do high school students. (See Appendix Table H2.15.)

⁵A pair of racial/ethnic self-identification questions that have been used on some past government data collection efforts was used. The first of these questions uses the categories White, Black, Asian or Pacific Islander, American Indian or Alaskan Native, and Other. The second of these asks for information on Spanish or Hispanic origin. As a result, a large fraction of respondents select the “Other” response to the first question. Many of these individuals indicate that they are of Spanish or Hispanic origin. Persons of Spanish or Hispanic origin may belong to any of the race/ethnic categories.

Table 2.8

Percentage of Students Who Report Staying Away From Specific Places Because Someone Might Hurt or Bother Them There

Place	Percentage	95% CI	N
Places in school or on the way to school			
Other places on the school grounds	11	10.4 - 12.6	15965
Any school restrooms	11	10.2 - 12.1	15964
Any hallways or stairs in the school	10	8.8 - 10.6	15974
Other places inside school building	10	8.6 - 10.4	15964
The shortest way to school or the bus	10	8.8 - 10.9	15946
Parts of the school cafeteria	9	7.8 - 9.4	15978
Any entrances into the school	8	7.4 - 9.4	15977
Places away from the school			
Any other place in your neighborhood	16	14.9 - 18.2	15970
Outside on the street where you live	10	9.1 - 11.1	15977

Note. Percentage = weighted percentage. 95% CI = 95% confidence interval for percentage.

N = unweighted number of respondents.

Urban students avoid places in the school and in their neighborhoods in higher percentages than do rural students.

In one set of questions, we asked students about their exposure to violence “this year in school.” Responses are summarized in Table 2.9, which shows that 28% report having seen a teacher threatened by a student, 20% report having had to fight to protect themselves, and 12% report having seen a teacher hit or attacked by a student. As with perceptions of safety, there are differences in exposure to violence according to race/ethnicity. Among students who identify themselves as Black, 40% report having seen a teacher threatened by a student. This is higher than the 27% of White students who report having seen a teacher threatened by a student. A smaller percentage (18%) of students who identify themselves as Asian or Pacific Islanders report having seen a teacher threatened by a student. For two of three questions about exposure to violence, boys report more exposure than do girls and middle school students report more exposure than do high school students. The difference is particularly large for reports that the student “had to fight to protect yourself,” with 28% of boys and 12% of girls answering in the affirmative. Details are presented in Appendix Table H2.16.

An alternative way to describe the distribution of victimization and safety in schools according to student reports is to form composite scales that combine reports for multiple items. Results for such scales are displayed in a T-score metric – where the mean is 50 for the nation’s schools and the standard deviation is 10 – are shown in Appendix Table H2.17. The mean score for Safety according to student reports for urban middle/junior high schools is a standard deviation below the mean for all schools (T-score = 39.9). The mean score for student

Table 2.9

Percentage of Students Experiencing Specific Threats or Violence This Year in School

Experience	Percentage	95% CI	N
Seen a teacher threatened by a student	28	26.5 - 30.2	15965
Had to fight to protect yourself	20	18.9 - 21.8	15974
Seen a teacher hit or attacked by a student	12	10.4 - 12.9	15966

Note. Percentage = weighted percentage. 95% CI = 95% confidence interval for percentage.

N = unweighted number of respondents.

Victimization for urban middle schools is more than three quarters of a standard deviation above the mean for all schools (T-score = 57.7). Once again, middle schools are seen as less safe and to be characterized by more victimization than are high schools.

Discussion and Summary

The NSDPS is a valuable source of contemporary information about problem behavior in schools. At the same time, any single research project has limitations and ambiguities. In this section, some of these limitations are discussed. This section also discusses the nature of problem behavior in schools and emphasizes the variability of problem behavior among schools.

Difficulties in Obtaining Information About Problem Behavior

The most important single limitation in interpreting information about problem behavior provided by the NSDPS stems from the difficulty that was encountered in obtaining the cooperation of schools and school districts with the research. Participation rates for principal, teacher, and student surveys were described in Chapter 1 (Tables 1.2, 1.4, 1.5, and 1.6). A school is considered to have participated in the teacher or student surveys only if a sufficient number of questionnaires of each type was returned to represent a usable response. The highest level of participation was obtained for the Phase 1 principal questionnaire, where 66% of schools participated. Few schools that failed to participate in Phase 1 participated in the Phase 2 principal survey, and the participation rate for the Phase 2 principal survey fell to 50%. Even fewer schools participated in the portion of the research involving surveys of teachers (46%) and students (36%).

Participation was more difficult to obtain among urban schools and it was particularly difficult to obtain in urban high schools. Whereas 75% of rural elementary schools participated in the Phase 1 principal survey, only 59% of urban high schools participated in that survey (see Table 1.2). A usable level of participation in student surveys was obtained in 50% of the rural middle/junior high schools from which it was sought, whereas only 23% of urban high schools participated in student survey (see Table 1.5). Participation was associated with a number of school and community characteristics summarized in Appendix Table B1.1. The school characteristics examined in Table B1.1 are estimates obtained from the mailing list vendor or from the Common Core of Data (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.). The community

characteristics examined there are for the zip code aggregations of 1990 census data (Bureau of the Census, 1992, 1993). Several indicators imply that schools in central cities of urbanized areas were less likely to participate than were rural or suburban schools. Elementary and middle/junior high schools were more likely to participate if located in areas where most housing is owner occupied. There is also a tendency for elementary and middle schools located in areas where a high proportion of families with children are female headed to be under represented among participating schools. High schools in areas where residents are highly educated are under represented among participating schools.

Although this was a study supported initially by the National Institute of Justice and eventually by the U.S. Department of Education as well, and although it was endorsed by the National Association of Secondary School Principals and the National Association of Elementary School Principals, it was very difficult to recruit schools to participate. Differential participation rates for schools in communities with different characteristics may have introduced bias into some estimates, and it is not possible to know precisely how much bias may have been introduced. Although school weights were designed to minimize bias by correcting for some differential response rate tendencies, and although the rationale for their use is plausible, their potential effect on bias cannot be known.

Refusal to participate occurred both at the school and at the district level. In most cases, we do not know why schools refused to participate, because principals or other educational personnel were adept at avoiding our attempts to communicate. And, of course, we can never know for sure why specific principals or school districts refused to participate as they were at liberty not to tell us or to tell us anything they found convenient.

Influence of school reluctance to participate on the research. The first influence that reluctance on the part of schools or districts had on the research was the large amount of effort that had to be devoted to persuading schools or districts to participate.

The second influence is the potential for nonparticipation to introduce systematic error (bias) in the results. Despite efforts to reduce bias by application of nonresponse weights, there is no convincing way to eliminate refusal to participate as a potential source of bias.

Alternative Ways of Estimating the Extent of Problem Behavior

Different methods of measuring crime and other forms of problem behavior are expected to produce different estimates of its level. For example, estimates of the incidence of crime made from counts of reports of crime made to the police are very much lower than the estimates made from the self-reports of individuals about crimes they have committed or the reports of citizens of their personal victimizations. Some part of the difference in levels estimated by the different methods is undoubtedly due to defects of the different methods (Hindelang, Hirschi, & Weis, 1981). For example, any method that depends on reports of an official (a police officer, a school principal) will generally underestimate crime or problem behavior for the simple reason that not all instances of such behavior will be known to the official, the official may not regard some

behavior as sufficiently serious instances to be recorded or reported, the official may fail to report, and so on.

But some part of difference in levels estimated by different methods is also due to the measurement of different things. For example, counts of reported crime measure events that at least someone regarded as sufficiently serious to merit being reported. On the other hand, counts of self-reported misconduct usually will capture some minor or non-criminal behavior that matches the description of the behavior inquired about. Scales composed of collections of self-reports about a variety of behaviors have the virtue that they can sample from a broad band of problem behavior and may be most valuable for measuring individual differences in propensity to misbehave. Some of the misbehavior, however, would not always be defined as “crime.” However that may be, Hindelang et al. (1981) concluded from a careful study of the reliability and validity of self-reports of delinquent behavior that “delinquency exists most clearly in the minds of those least likely to engage in it” (p. 219) and that self-reports of delinquent behavior may be least valid for those groups who are most delinquent.

Similar measurement issues occur when victim reports (Sparks, 1982) or different ways of measuring drug use or abuse are used as indicators (Reuter, 1999). A person must interpret an event as a victimization in order to report it, and it is evident that what is seen as a criminal victimization to one person may not be interpreted that way by another. Accordingly, it may be best to interpret victim reports as reports of perceived incivilities or crimes.

All estimates of problem behavior or crime based on reports in questionnaires or interviews (as opposed to archival records) are prone to be subject to errors related to the decay of memory as well as to the telescoping of events outside of a recall period into the recall period – and some respondents may not attend much to a recall period at all. It is not expected that rates estimated for a one-month recall period will translate in any straightforward way into rates estimated for other recall periods – e.g., one year.

For all of these reasons it is expected that different indicators will produce different estimates of the amount and possibly the distribution of problem behavior. Each of the indicators based on principal, teacher, and student reports described earlier in this chapter are of separate value.

Other Surveys of School Crime and Disorder

No surveys of crime and disorder in schools that are strictly comparable to the present one exist.

Fast Response Survey System. One superficially similar study is a Fast Response Survey System (FRSS) study conducted by Westat for the National Center for Education Statistics (Heaviside, Rowand, Williams, & Farris, 1998) in the spring and summer of 1997. The FRSS study polled principals about crimes reported to police or other law enforcement representatives. In contrast to the present survey, the FRSS provided respondents with definitions of terms used and asked respondents to report incidents involving multiple crimes only once – essentially

listing the incident only for the most important type of crime it involved. Whereas the present survey depended almost entirely on mailed responses (a handful of questionnaires were completed in telephone interviews), telephone interviews were utilized more extensively in the much shorter FRSS. The FRSS combination of interview and mailed questionnaire yielded a higher response rate (88%) than the did the present survey. The universe for the FRSS was limited to public schools and excluded special education, vocational, alternative and ungraded schools. The universe for the present study included public, private, and Catholic schools and did not exclude special schools.

The general pattern of results for school crimes are similar in the two studies. Both show much more crime in middle schools, that minor crimes are much more common than serious crimes, and that there is a tendency for most crimes to occur at higher rates in urban schools than in other schools. The present study sometimes found higher rates than did the FRSS, however. For example, we estimate (see Table 2.1) that 21% of middle schools had at least one incident of physical attack or fight with a weapon reported to law enforcement, whereas the estimate from the FRSS was 12%. Similarly, we estimate that 17% of middle schools had at least one incident of robbery reported to authorities, whereas the FRSS estimate was 5%. In both cases the differences in estimated rates are statistically significant at the $p < .01$ level. Such differences as these which are beyond what is expected due to sampling error may be due to (a) differences in the universe of schools, (b) differences in the way questions are presented, (c) differences in data capturing technique (phone interview versus self-report questionnaire), (d) differences in the context in which questions are embedded, (e) differences due to increased sensitivity of respondents to crime or increased propensity to report such crimes to the police in view of highly publicized violent events in schools that occurred between the two surveys, or (f) differences in the level of crime occurring between the two survey occasions. If FRSS respondents attended to the instruction to count each incident involving multiple crimes only once, this would tend to produce lower estimates than would the lack of such instruction. All of these possibilities are worthy of further exploration, but they are beyond the scope of the present report.

Safe School Study. A second survey of a national sample of schools with superficial similarity to the present one is the Safe School Study (SSS) conducted for the National Institute of Education (1978). The SSS conducted surveys of public junior and senior high school students and teachers, excluding those in comprehensive (e.g., K - 12) schools and perhaps excluding those from school districts with 50 or fewer students (it is not clear from the report).

Again, the general pattern of results for school crimes are similar in the SSS and the NSDPS. Both show much more crime in middle schools, that minor crimes are much more common than serious crimes, and that there is a tendency for most crimes to occur at higher rates in urban schools than in other schools. The specific levels estimated by the two surveys sometimes differ, however. The SSS conducted surveys at different months during the year, whereas all of the NSDPS surveys were conducted in the spring. In addition, there were differences in the way the questions were presented with the SSS using a branching format such that respondents were first asked about thefts and then about the size of the thefts, about attacks and then about whether a doctor was required. In the NSDPS respondents were first asked about victimizations in the school year and then asked about victimization in the past month, whereas in the SSS

respondents were asked only about specific months. Appendix Table H2.18 shows details for two similar questions asked of students in both surveys. The estimated percentage of students reporting theft of items worth less than a dollar in the 1976 survey was very much larger than the number estimated in the 1998 survey. The percentage of students reporting that they had been attacked but not hurt badly enough to see a doctor was also lower in the 1998 survey although the differences between 1976 and 1998 rates are not significant for the high school and rural school comparisons. Estimated rates of minor theft per 1000 teachers is also lower in the 1998 NSDPS than in the 1976 SSS. But the estimated rates of attack not serious enough to require seeing a doctor are higher for the NSDPS than for the SSS; the rate for rural schools is very much higher in the 1998 than in the 1976 survey. Appendix Table H2.19 shows the details.

Such differences as these which are beyond what is expected due to sampling error may be due to (a) differences in the universe of schools, (b) differences in the way questions are presented, (c) differences in the context in which questions are embedded, (d) differences in participation rates, or (e) differences in the level of crime occurring between the two survey occasions. All four of these possibilities may account for differences in the level of these crimes estimated from the NSDPS and the SSS. In the NSDPS the questionnaire contained separate questions about minor attack (no doctor) and more serious attack (doctor attention required) and separate questions about minor and more serious theft, whereas in the SSS these questions were not independent. Potentially of equal importance, the “last month” victimization questions in the NSDPS questionnaire were preceded by a series of questions asking about victimizations occurring in the last year. It is possible that the longer reference period in the preceding questions in NSDPS led some respondents to infer that researchers were inquiring about more serious incidents (Winkielman, Knäuper, & Schwarz, 1998). This “more serious” set may then have carried over to the “last month” questions. The way questions are asked and the context within which they are embedded can influence estimates produced from them (Krosnick, 1999; Schwarz, 1999).

School Crime Supplement to the National Crime Victimization Survey. A third study with some similarity to the present one is the School Crime Supplement (SCS) to the National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS), conducted in 1989 and again in 1995. In the SCS (Chandler, Chapman, Rand, & Taylor, 1998) a household survey with a 6-month recall period is conducted, and household members between the ages of 12 and 19 who attended a school at any time in the past six months and who were enrolled in a school that could lead to a high school diploma were asked supplemental school-related questions after completing the NCVS interview. Unlike the SSS and NSDPS, students are located in the SCS by going through sampled households rather than sampled schools, and students in any kind of school (not just public) would be included if it could be on the pathway to a high school diploma. Over 70% of the SCS respondents were interviewed by telephone with most of the rest interviewed in person, and some were interviewed by proxy (i.e., someone else provided information about the member of the sample). The SCS asked students whether they avoided certain places in the school that are similar to questions asked in the NSDPS, but there are minor wording changes and the SCS implied a 6-month recall period and asks if the places were avoided. The NSDPS asks instead if a student usually avoids these places.

A similar pattern of results were obtained in the SCS (Kaufman, Chen, Choy, Chandler, Chapman, Rand, & Ringel, 1998) and the NSDPS. In both studies, younger individuals are more likely to have avoided places at school, Black and Hispanic students were more likely to report avoiding places than were White students, and students in urban areas were more likely to avoid places in school than other students. At the same time, Appendix Table H2.20 shows that the percentages of students who reported that they usually avoid places in school in the NSDPS are much larger than the percentages who reported that they did avoid places in the school in the SCS. For all students aged 12 or older, 20% reported usually avoiding at least one of five specific places in school in the NSDPS whereas 9% reported avoiding these same places in the 1995 SCS. Again, the context within which questions are asked may help explain the large differences in the percentages obtained in the two studies. In the SCS, individuals were asked about school experiences after having completed a lengthy survey of general crime victimization questions. There is no way at this time to determine what features of question presentation, interview versus self-report approach, question context, or differences over time may account for the large differences in level of avoidance of places in school estimated in the two studies.

It is probably best to regard any single estimate of the level of problem behavior, victimization, or safety as a function in part of school safety and in part of method of inquiry.⁶ Put another way, alternative indicators should be viewed as alternative indicators and no indicator viewed as providing an absolute count of problem behavior, victimization or safety. Because alternative indicators generally show the same pattern of results across groups of respondents or schools, it appears sensible to make comparisons among schools or among individuals *within* any of the studies mentioned here. But it does not appear profitable to speculate too much about the meaning of differences in levels estimated according to different methods.

Other Limitations of the Information from the NSDPS

Sampling. All survey search shares the limitation that the information developed depends upon the validity of the reports of respondents. It is well known that respondents make errors of interpretation and recall in reporting events such as personal victimization (Panel for the

⁶Alternative sources of information about youth problem behavior exist. These include (a) the Monitoring the Future surveys (Johnston, O'Malley, & Bachman, annually) which have made annual inquiries of a national sample of high school seniors since 1975 (and since 1991 of eighth and tenth graders as well); (b) the Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance summaries (Kann et al., 1998) conducted in odd-numbered years since 1991 in school-based surveys in 33 states and certain localities including student self-reports of fighting, carrying weapons, feelings of safety at school, and other problem or risky behavior; (c) the National Longitudinal Surveys of Youth 1997 cohort (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 1999) in which persons aged 12 - 16 years identified in a household screener survey were asked to complete a self-administered questionnaire about drug use and delinquent behavior. We have compared the present survey with those that appear on their face to provide the most comparable data. See Appendix Tables H2.21 and H2.22 for more on self-reported delinquent behavior from NSDPS.

Evaluation of Crime Surveys, 1976), the way questions are asked influence the answers (Krosnick, 1999), and that people do not always tell the truth. Error could also enter the data when respondents make mistakes in marking answer documents, or when an interviewer makes an error in recording information. Accordingly, the information gleaned from the present surveys should be regarded as one fallible source of information about the matters explored in this report.

Most survey research is also limited by the size and nature of the sample examined. In the present research, our aim was to obtain a probability sample of all schools serving students in any grade from kindergarten through grade 12, including public, Catholic, and private schools. Coverage error is present to the extent to which the list from which our sample was drawn is incomplete. Although we used what we judged to be the most up-to-date and complete list of schools available, some degree of coverage error is probably inevitable. Error or bias may occur when schools or individuals fail to participate in the provision of information. This source of error or bias was described above. Although non-response adjustments were used to minimize the effects of non-participation error or bias, these adjustments are probably imperfect.

Because it is prohibitively expensive and unduly burdensome of respondents to include all schools and all individuals in the present research, samples were selected to represent all of the schools in the nation. Within schools, samples of students were drawn to represent the school. Weights have been applied to responses so that estimates from the probability sample represents all schools, and as noted these weights have been adjusted to account as well as is possible for non-participation. Estimates made from samples naturally differ somewhat from the values that might be obtained from a complete enumeration. In this report, standard errors or confidence intervals are usually presented to provide indices of the variation due to sampling that may be expected.⁷ Readers are encouraged to consider the point estimates and confidence intervals (or standard errors) in interpreting information.

Raters are nested within schools. In this research, all respondents were asked to report about one and only one school. No informant described multiple schools, and it is possible that many of the respondents have a limited experience of the full range of schools. When a respondent is asked to indicate if gangs are a problem in the school (principal questionnaire), how safe from vandalism, attacks, and theft the hallways are (teacher questionnaire), or whether the school rules are fair (student questionnaire), the information provided about the school is confounded with the perspectives of the respondents. Because a set of schools is not being rated by a common set of raters, it is possible that objectively safer schools are sometimes judged less safe than objectively less safe schools (Birnbaum, 1999). Students with no experience of very safe schools may, for example, indicate that their own disordered school is very safe. Teachers

⁷Because a complex sample design involving stratification was used, and because of the use of weights adjusting for the sample design and nonparticipation, standard errors have been estimated using a re-sampling method known as the jackknife. Because the estimation of standard errors in this way is time consuming and cumbersome, some appendix tables report “nominal” significance levels based on estimates made on the assumption of simple random sampling which underestimates sampling error.

and principals may do the same. Worse, principals in some schools experiencing a great deal of disorder may tend to discount the seriousness of many specific incidents of crime or violence and report relatively fewer incidents than may principals in very orderly schools. In the case of teacher and student reports, it is possible to estimate the proportion of variance that lies between schools (see Appendix F), because there are multiple raters for each school. Even so, the fact that raters are nested within schools and probably do not have direct experience of the full range of school environments is an inherent limitation in survey research of the present kind.

Summary

The nature of problem behavior in schools. Minor forms of problem behavior are common in schools. For example, 27% of teachers report that student behavior keeps them from teaching a fair amount or a great deal. This minor misconduct can be a serious problem because it interferes with efforts by schools to pursue their mission to conduct education. The percentage of teachers per school reporting that student behavior keeps them from teaching at least a fair amount ranges from 0% to 100%. In a quarter of schools 42% or more of teachers report that student behavior keeps them from teaching at least a fair amount.

Serious forms of problem behavior such as physical attacks or fights involving a weapon, robberies, or treats involving a knife or a gun occur less frequently than the more pervasive minor kinds of student misconduct. But they occur frequently enough that they are also clearly major problems. Almost 7% of schools reported at least one incident of physical attack or fight involving a weapon to law enforcement officials, and for middle/junior high schools the percentage was 21%. Being threatened or attacked in school is a relatively common experience among students, with 19% of students reporting threats and 14% reporting attacks. A startling 5% of students report having been threatened with a knife or a gun. Such incidents are far less common among teachers. Although 20% of secondary school teachers (and 31% of urban middle school teachers) report being threatened in remarks by a student, half of one percent report having had a weapon pulled on them and seven tenths of a percent report having been attacked and having to see a doctor.

Evidence from the reports of teachers, principals, and students implies that most kinds of problem behavior are more common in middle schools than in elementary schools or high schools. The exception is drug use – student self-reports imply that drug use is more extensive in high schools.

Variability among schools. There is variability among schools in the level of crime or disorder they experience. According to the school crime scale – which indexes the extensiveness of a variety of crimes reported to law enforcement according to principal reports – the *average* urban middle/junior high school scores about a standard deviation for schools above the mean for all schools (Table 2.2). Equally important, there is great variability among urban middle/junior high schools in their scores on the school crime scale.

One way to obtain a concrete impression of the degree of variability observed among schools is to review the reports of principals, teachers, and students for four school shown in Table 2.10.

This table shows how the people in two urban and two suburban middle schools described the school environment. The schools were selected so that there is one relatively safe and one relatively less safe school in each type of location according to the Student and Teacher Safety scales. The Teacher Safety scale T-scores for the four schools are as follows: A = 62, B = 35, C = 55, D = 34. The Student Safety scale T-scores for the four schools are A = 67, B = 31, C = 53, D = 29. The Teacher Victimization T-scores are A = 38, B = 68, C = 52, D = 72. The Student Victimization T-scores are A = 37, B = 65, C = 53, D = 61. These are not the most extreme schools in the sample, but they illustrate the variation.

Table 2.10 shows that school B's principal indicated having reported 40 physical attacks or fights without a weapon to law enforcement personnel, school C indicated having reported 10, school A reported 0, and school D failed to provide this information. The majority of teachers in the two less safe schools report that students often or almost always talk at inappropriate times, make disruptive noises in class, tease other students, make threats or curse at others, and are distracted by student misbehavior. Much smaller percentages of teachers in the relatively safer schools report that these kinds of misconduct occur often or almost always. In the relatively safer suburban middle school, 9% of teachers report that the behavior of some students keep them from teaching a fair amount or a good deal of the time; in the relatively less safe urban middle school, 74% of teachers report being blocked from teaching by student behavior. In the two less safe schools 72% and 74% of teachers indicated that they received obscene remarks or gestures from students; in the safer schools the percentages were 6% and 31%. Over half of the teachers reported having been threatened by a student in the two less safe schools, whereas only 0% and 6% of teachers in the two safer schools reported such treats. Students' reports of victimization experiences in the safer and less safe schools are not as great as might be expected. Schools that score high in safety by one criterion do not always score high according to other criteria.

The concrete portraits provided by examining the details of these four schools' reports of crime, victimization experiences, classroom orderliness, and perceptions of safety underscore the earlier characterization of disorderly schools as uncivil places. Incivility appears to be more pervasive than the most serious kinds of crimes such as attacks involving weapons. Physical attacks and fights, however, are not rare in schools.

Table 2.10
Illustrative Middle Schools Differing in Their Levels of Safety

Source and school characteristic	Suburban		Urban	
	Safer A	Less safe B	Safer C	Less safe D
Principal				
School enrollment	535	1230	264	1013
Number of crimes reported to authorities				
Physical attack or fight, weapon	0	0	0	0
Physical attack or fight, no weapon	0	40	10	NR
Robbery	0	0	0	0
Theft or larceny	0	10	12	NR
Vandalism	0	5	15	NR
Teachers (% saying often or almost always)				
Students pay attention in class	97	59	75	39
Students take things that do not belong to them	0	31	0	61
Students do what I ask them to do	97	69	94	48
Students destroy or damage property	3	25	0	55
Students talk at inappropriate times	21	70	25	81
Students make disruptive noises	0	54	19	58
Students try to physically hurt other people	0	41	12	39
Students tease other students	6	80	38	65
Students make threats to or curse at others	3	54	6	61
Students are distracted by the misbehavior of other students	6	75	25	78
The classroom activity comes to a stop because of discipline problems	3	34	13	52
I spend more time disciplining than I do teaching	0	31	13	39

continued . . .

Table 2.10 (continued)
Illustrative Middle Schools Differing in Their Levels of Safety

Source and school characteristic	Suburban		Urban	
	Safer A	Less safe B	Safer C	Less safe D
Teacher (% responding a fair amount or a great deal)				
How much does the behavior of some students in your classroom keep you from teaching?	9	65	38	74
Teacher (% experiencing in school year)				
Damage to personal property worth less than \$10	3	51	56	36
Damage to personal property worth more than \$10	3	23	31	23
Theft of property worth less than \$10	6	41	31	32
Theft of property worth more than \$10	6	12	12	36
Was attacked and had to see a doctor	0	3	0	10
Was attacked, not seriously enough to see a doctor	0	15	0	16
Received obscene remarks or gestures from a student	6	72	31	74
Been threatened in remarks by a student	0	59	6	58
Had a weapon pulled on me	0	0	0	0
Teacher (% indicating very unsafe or fairly unsafe)				
Your classroom while teaching	0	10	0	23
Empty classrooms	0	21	0	28
Hallways and stairs	0	34	0	19
The cafeteria	0	25	0	26
The restrooms used by students	0	32	0	29
Locker room or gym	7	51	0	14
Parking lot	3	37	0	19
Elsewhere outside on school grounds	0	12	0	19

continued . . .

Table 2.10 (continued)
Illustrative Middle Schools Differing in Their Levels of Safety

Source and school characteristic	Suburban		Urban	
	Safer A	Less safe B	Safer C	Less safe D
Students (% experiencing in school year)				
Theft of less than \$1 from locker or desk	42	64	60	71
Theft of greater than \$1 from locker or desk	49	60	36	67
Physical attack	2	22	30	14
Robbery, things worth less than \$1	0	8	6	6
Robbery, things worth more than \$1	0	8	8	8
Threat of beating	0	26	17	15
Threat with knife or gun	0	2	4	6
Students (% avoiding place)				
Shortest way to school or the bus	0	28	11	32
Any entrances into the school	0	22	6	24
Any hallways or stairs in the school	0	8	6	24
Parts of the school cafeteria	5	26	6	22
Any school restrooms	2	17	9	20
Other places inside school building	0	19	0	26
Other places on the school grounds	0	20	4	20
Students (% experiencing or observing this year)				
Had to fight to protect yourself in school	0	33	22	28
Seen a teacher threatened by a student	0	50	28	44
Seen a teacher hit by a student	5	36	6	38

Note. NR = no report; number not ascertained because principal made no report.