

Discussion of Findings

At first glance, with an average of 3,849 violent crimes per year, this report might be seen as an indication there is a large volume of violence occurring in South Carolina schools. However, the occurrence of life-threatening or very serious violence was comparatively infrequent. Simple assault and intimidation, offenses where there is no serious threat to the victim's life or immediate health and well being, constituted 83.2% of all reported school violence. Over the three year period there was an annual average of 434 aggravated assaults, 28 rapes, 53 robberies and less than one murder (two over a three-year period). These findings must be considered within the context of the size of the school age population. There were 1,500 public and private schools operating in South Carolina during school year 1997-98. There were more than 700,000 students in South Carolina's public and private schools in school year 1997-98, with more than 50,000 professional staff (public school only) as well as an undetermined number of other employees (SCDOE, 1999). Although any level of violence is unacceptable, considering the large number of students and the proportion of a child's time that is spent in school, these findings are not as discouraging as they might seem at first glance.

Weapon use, beyond personal weapons such as hands, feet, fists, etc., was uncommon in school violence. Knives and blunt objects were the most commonly used weapon after personal weapons, but their use was comparatively infrequent, with 233 knives and 269 blunt objects involved in school violence during the three-year time period. The use of firearms was even less common. Over the three-year period, there were 113 instances of firearms involved in school violence. The infrequent use of weapons might be related to the low level of serious injuries reported. However, when firearms (overwhelmingly handguns) were involved, the offenses were more serious. Both murders involved handguns. It is important to note that this finding is not necessarily a valid indicator of the degree to which firearms and other dangerous weapons are present in schools, but simply an indicator of how often they are used in violent crimes.

Not surprisingly, school violence was a youth dominated phenomenon, both in the roles of victims and offenders. School age children, though not necessarily students at the school where the violence occurred or even necessarily students, accounted for a majority of the victims and offenders involved in school violence. The relationship between the victims and the offenders was overwhelmingly that of someone who was known to the victim, but was not a friend or family member. Victimization by strangers was infrequent.

Females made up slightly less than half the victims, while they accounted for approximately a quarter of those arrested for school violence. Males made up slightly more than half of the victims of school violence, but accounted for nearly three-quarters of those arrested. African-Americans accounted for nearly half of school violence victims, and more than seventy percent of the arrestees. Ethnicity (Hispanic or non-Hispanic) was not a factor. Very few Hispanics were reported either as victims or arrestees.

School violence occurred primarily while schools were open. Most reported school violence occurred during the school year, on the weekdays and during typical operating hours. Less than three percent of school violence was reported on weekends, and less than seven percent of school violence was reported during the months of June, July and August.

It is important to note the limitations of these findings as well as the need for additional research concerning school violence. The SCIBRS data, while a valuable source of information, does not provide information concerning the economic, academic and many other relevant characteristics of those involved in school violence. Additional research to collect and analyze such data would be of great value toward achieving a better understanding of this problem.

Violence in schools is, quite properly, a matter of great concern. However, these findings indicate that the greater portion of school violence consists of personal confrontations that do not involve weapons and do not result in serious injury to the victims. These confrontations occur among juveniles and young adults of school age, while school is in session. Hopefully, these findings will provide some additional level of understanding and insight into school violence.