

A Violence Profile of Rural vs. Urban Schools

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The Changing Landscape of Rural Communities

Despite the common stereotype of rural communities as places of serene stability, life in rural communities and small towns is subject to the same changing societal forces affecting the rest of America. Rural communities are experiencing the changing structure of the family, increased mobility with society, poor economies, and an increasingly diverse population (National Center on Rural Justice and Crime Prevention, 2001).

Rural residents are less educated than urban residents with as many as 23.5% who do not have high school diplomas. Rural youth are also less likely to go to college (23% rural vs. 29% urban) and are less likely to graduate from college (13% rural vs. 23% urban). In 1997, violent crimes in cities with populations of 1 million people or more dropped 6.2%, while rural counties experienced a 3.1% increase (National Center on Rural Justice and Crime Prevention, 2001).

Violence in Rural Schools

“Despite the perception that non-urban schools are free of violence, communities of all sizes, ethnic makeup, and socio-economic status have experienced violence in schools,” (Friday, 1998, p. 24). However, “...because of the infrequency of published acts of violence in small schools, rural administrators, board members, and teachers are likely to feel safe” (Bachus, 1994, p.19) and they adopt a wait and see attitude about school violence.

There is little published work on rural education and school violence despite increasing interest in rural crime topics (Bachman, 1992; Saltiel, Gilchrist, & Harvie, 1992). While gangs and violence on school property have been studied in urban settings, little is known about violence in rural schools (Bachus, 1994). The U.S. Department of Education (1992) reported that teachers in rural schools had similar experiences and perceptions about violence as urban teachers.

Rural schools face the same problems as urban schools: escalating violence, family breakdown, the influence of violence in the media, and more significantly a lack of resources to systematically address these problems (DeYoung and Lawrence, 1995). Ronan-Herzog and Pittman, (1995) stated that rural schools may actually face a compounded more difficult challenge however. Along with a lack of resources, a commonly held belief in many rural schools is that they don't have the problems of racism,

violence and general decay that more metropolitan schools have. As a result rural school administrators are not as likely to embrace the implementation of violence prevention programs in schools – especially given the likelihood that many rural schools are faced with what they perceive as more pervasive problems of low academic achievement among students and overall poor performance of their schools on certain national standardized tests.

More recently Petersen, Beekley, Speaker, and Pietzak (1998) studied violence in school districts of varying sizes from 12 states. They reported that rural teachers and administrators ranked their greatest concerns as verbal and physical threats from students and parents, worry over increases in student-to-student violent behavior, and increases in the rates of violent behavior in elementary and middle schools. This study indicates an increasing concern of teachers over the problem of violence in their schools.

A Profile of Rural vs. Urban Students and Teachers

This paper focuses on the comparison of Eastern Kentucky students and staff data as compared to student and staff data from Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Both groups were administered the National School Crime and Safety Survey (Hamilton Fish Institute, Student and Staff forms, 1999). The Kentucky sample included 614 students who live in a rural area in southeastern Kentucky, 587 of which were in ninth grade when the survey was administered. The Milwaukee sample represents 208 students who live in urban Milwaukee and were in grades 9 through 12 with the majority of them being 10th graders at the time of the survey. Students in the Milwaukee sample have been identified as being located in high-crime neighborhoods and suffering from low rates of graduation and poor academic performance. Kentucky students are representative of the Southeastern region of the state that likewise suffers from low rates of education and poor academic performance. Five-hundred and ninety three students in the Kentucky sample were White, 4 students were Black, 3 Asian, 2 Pacific Islander, 5 Native American, and 10 Other. Milwaukee students were 8 White, 80 Black, 4 Hispanic, 7 Asian, 0 Pacific Islander, 7 Native American, and 1 Other.

Preliminary data findings reveal that Kentucky (rural) students in the sample were more likely to be victims and perpetrators of violence than those students in the Milwaukee sample. Both of these measures were statistically significant at the .01 and .014 level respectively (See Tables 1 and 2).

Table 1 – Group Statistics

	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error of Mean
Propensity to fight	Kentucky	577	13.6066	4.79976	.19982
	Milwaukee	93	14.5054	4.65931	.48315
Victimization at school	Kentucky	569	14.0439	7.04586	.29538
	Milwaukee	89	11.9888	4.73741	.50216
Perpetration at school	Kentucky	583	10.0532	5.19869	.21531
	Milwaukee	92	8.9783	3.59174	.37447

Table 2 – Independent Samples Test

	T-test for Equality of Means	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference
Propensity to fight	-1.683	668	.093	-.8988	.53419
Victimization at school	3.528	156.526	.001	2.0552	.58260
Perpetration at school	2.489	158.407	.014	1.0749	.43195

Kentucky (rural) students were more likely to carry weapons than were the Milwaukee students. Sixty-eight out of 601 students (11.3%) responded that they had brought a knife to school in the past 30 days, whereas no Milwaukee students indicated that they had brought a knife to school during the preceding 30-day period. These results were significant at the .000 level. Nine (1.5%) of Kentucky students indicated they had brought a gun to school during the preceding 30-day period, whereas no Milwaukee students claimed to have brought a gun during this same time period. These differences were not statistically significant.

Comparison of teachers in Milwaukee and Kentucky showed that Milwaukee teachers felt as though there was less use of school safety measures and that they were in more danger than those in

Kentucky. This fact supports the idea that rural teachers and administrators may be under a false perception that violence is not as much of a problem in their schools, even though in this case, the students are in fact reporting more violence than those in the urban sample. Those who propose to implement violence prevention programs in rural schools may face more resistance from schools due to these misconceptions and therefore may need to present more convincing evidence to school administrators as to the need for these programs. Future research should be done to explore the extent of violence in rural schools. Schools in urban environments have been involved in increased school security over the last 5-10 years (metal detectors, increased law enforcement presence in schools, etc), whereas rural schools have not been as aggressive in implementing such measures. Clearly rural school administrators may need to consider increased security measures along with the implementation of comprehensive violence prevention programs in their schools.

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