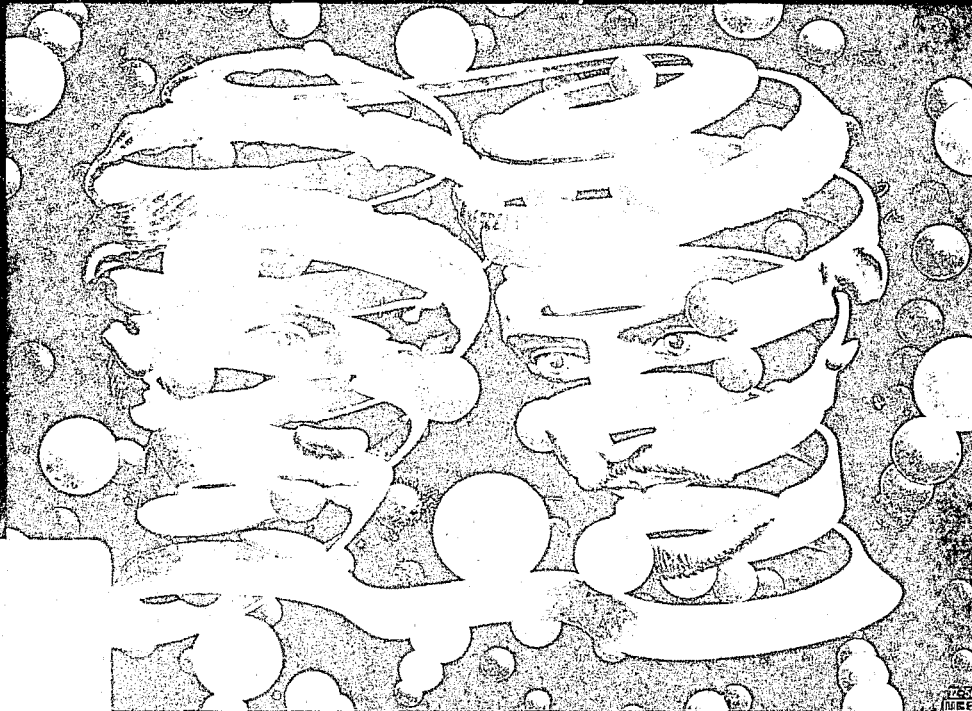


# School Safety

NATIONAL SCHOOL SAFETY CENTER NEWSJOURNAL

SPRING 1986



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**Drugs in school:  
We're losing  
our minds**

U.S. Department of Justice  
National Institute of Justice

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## School Safety

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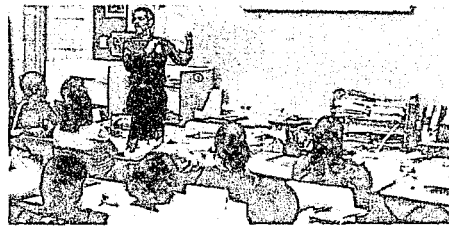
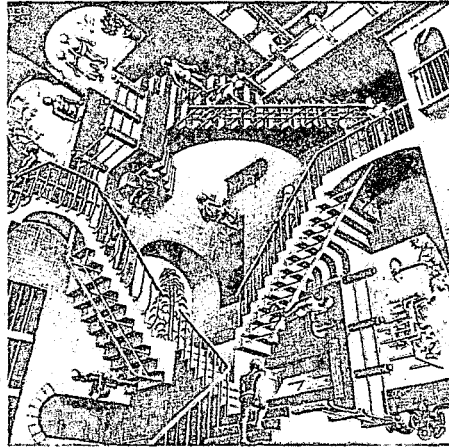
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ACQUISITIONS

# For the record: Chronic offenders are bad news

By Wolfgang Pindur  
and Donna K. Wells

**Research indicates a small core of youth are responsible for much of the nation's crime. The key to responding to these chronic offenders is information-sharing.**

"Hey man, lemme use a pencil." It was a minor request, a question asked by thousands of students each day in public schools across the country. But the outcome was far from common because the student was far from typical.

At about 10:30 one morning, Carl\*, a junior high school student, asked another student if he could borrow a pencil. When the student refused, Carl became angry and struck the other boy in the face. The entire incident was observed by the vice principal who immediately suspended Carl. His mother was called to the school.

By the time his mother arrived, Carl was enraged. When she attempted to get him into her car, his behavior turned violent. He began wildly striking and biting his mother. Carl was so out of control, the police were called, Carl was arrested and detained.

An isolated incident? Not for Carl. At the time of this arrest, although he was only 12 years old, Carl was well-known by both police and school officials. He had a documented history of child abuse and running away. By the time he was seven, Carl was "uncontrollable." He would come and go at his own pleasure - sometimes staying away for up to two days. He began by committing minor offenses. However, by the time he was 12, he had been arrested for car theft and animal torture.

Carl's behavior in school paralleled his life on the street. He had a high truancy rate and often was suspended for uncontrollable behavior. Yet through

it all, he remained in public school, attending classes with other students.

## Chronic juvenile offenders

Students such as Carl, those who are chronic juvenile offenders, are few and far between. Research has shown that they may comprise less than two percent of the entire juvenile delinquent population.<sup>1</sup> However, even though their numbers are small, they are responsible for large numbers of crimes, in both the schools and the community at large. Such chronic, serious offenders not only intimidate other students and teachers, they also impede the learning process.

The chronic offender acts in various disruptive ways. He bullies other students. He tries to intimidate teachers and school administrators. Often this individual is involved in using and selling drugs on the school campus. The chronic offender literally can be described as a one-person crime wave.

Who are these juveniles? Chronic offenders predominantly are male. They usually are economically disadvantaged and are likely to have interpersonal difficulties and behavioral problems both in and outside of the school environment. Many chronic offenders, like Carl, come from broken homes and experienced emotional, physical or sexual abuse.<sup>2</sup> Their experiences with male authority figures are often negative.

## Abused and uncontrollable

Carl was raised as an only child by parents who never lived together.

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Except for a few brief periods, he lived with his mother. At the age of five and again at seven, he resided with his father and stepmother for a few weeks. At seven, he came and went as he pleased, sometimes staying with friends and simply not coming home.

Carl's uncontrollable anger and his difficulties at home were not his only problems. In surveying Carl's life, it became apparent that he had been physically abused by almost all of the adult males that played any meaningful role in his life, including his father.

When Carl was 15, he said of his father, "He was ungoodful father. When I was little, four years old, he left and did two years at San Quentin." When Carl was asked if he would play ball or go for a walk with his father, he smiled as if it were a ridiculous question and said, "No. No sports." The only things he did with his father were have a talk or maybe drink beer together. Carl recalled being beaten by his father for "not following little stuff."

Chronic offenders like Carl are responsible for a disproportionate amount of the violence described by Alfred Regnery, administrator of the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (U.S. Department of Justice), in a speech to the National Conference on Juvenile Justice. Regnery noted that "the numbers for crime in the schools are . . . staggering. An estimated 282,000 students are attacked at school in a typical one-month period, and an estimated 5,200 teachers are physically attacked at school each month."<sup>3</sup>

According to these figures, juveniles themselves are often the victims of juvenile criminal activity. This violence can also be directed toward animals and school property.

It is interesting to note that Carl regularly attended school, when he was not under suspension. According to one of the school's assistant principals, although Carl did attend school, his behavior was "so disruptive" the school had no appropriate means to control or discipline him. School administrators were very concerned about the situation because they believed it to be just a matter of time before Carl "seriously hurt" another individual.

### **"He's going to hurt someone!"**

Juveniles spend a large percentage of their waking hours in school, and often school personnel can identify juveniles in trouble before other agencies. They can, in turn, cooperate with other professionals to respond to such juveniles. School personnel, in effect, can act as a warning system for troubled youth.

The warning signs for Carl continued. Within ten days of his release from a youth home, Carl argued with and pushed a school bus driver. His bus privileges were revoked immediately. School authorities notified Carl's probation officer of the revocation at once.

The next week, Carl was suspended from school because he could not control his behavior in art class. Again, the probation officer was notified. Carl's probation officer told him that any further behavior problems at home, school or on the streets would most likely result in "custody time." This cautionary note did nothing to stabilize Carl's behavior.

One week later, Carl had a verbal altercation which became so heated he needed assistance to regain control of himself. Less than one week later, without provocation, Carl hit Sam, another student, in the mouth and was suspended for five days. The assistant principal once again contacted the probation department concerning Carl's behavior and lack of control in the school setting. Later in the day Carl again confronted Sam and threatened to use a knife on him. Once again the assistant principal contacted probation and stressed that, in his opinion, without immediate intervention Carl was likely to hurt someone. Based on these behaviors, Carl's probation officer recommended that he be committed to a youth facility for 15 days. In the end, the disposition was 10 weekends in the county juvenile facility.

### **Murderer in the classroom**

Just a few weeks later school personnel felt it necessary to call a conference with Carl's mother. Carl had been back in school just four months, yet already he had an "extreme" number of absences. Additionally, he was failing all of his classes. Carl's mother was told that when her son did attend school, he

was a constant source of trouble. Carl was required to sign a student contract agreeing he would follow all school rules and regulations and he would also try to pass as many classes as possible. Failure to fulfill the contract could result in Carl's removal from the school for the remainder of the academic year.

Nine days later, at age 16, Carl committed cold-blooded murder. Yet, even with the homicide behind him, Carl continued to attend school. He sat in classes with other juveniles, continuing to manipulate and intimidate a growing number of students who were aware of Carl's involvement in the murder. It seemed the shooting had no great impact on Carl. He expressed no remorse over the death, nor did his behavior patterns change. He made no attempt to leave the area and, in fact, he continued to get into trouble, apparently not caring about future contact with the police. Eventually, he was arrested by police and charged with first degree murder. He is currently in prison.

### **The school as the central agency in the systems approach**

School officials have realized for some time that "violence doesn't begin or end with the schools." Bennie J. Swans, executive director of the Philadelphia Crisis Intervention Network, points out in a recent article in *School Safety* that Network staff "observed incidents spill onto the campuses, continue on public transportation or school buses, and draw still more attention and participants on the streets of the neighborhood." These situations can only be controlled if we involve "teachers, administrators, public transportation safety officers, police officers and residents of neighborhoods."<sup>4</sup> We would suggest that several other agencies, including the courts, prosecutors, corrections and community welfare groups, be added to Swans' list. All of them have regular contact with troubled juveniles, juveniles who are often enrolled in public schools.

Research on the Serious Habitual Offender/Drug Involved program (SHO/DI)<sup>5</sup> shows almost half of the chronic offenders, who are not institutionalized, attend public schools on a fairly regular basis. Often the schools

do not know who these individuals are because fragmented pieces of information are held by the various agencies dealing with the chronic offender. Information often is not shared between school authorities and other agencies due to the inherent parochial nature of public organizations.

The typical situation involves each agency doing its part and striving to maintain anonymity and confidentiality. The following story of Tom describes the consequences of not sharing information and handling incidents in isolation.

Tom is a juvenile who was arrested in connection with the stabbing death of an 18-year-old male during a fight. At the time of his arrest Tom already had been involved with the juvenile justice system a number of times. However, he had never been adjudicated on any offense. Instead, all of his prior offenses had been resolved at the intake level.

When Tom was just 11 years old, he was charged with petty theft. The next day the offense was settled at intake. Three years later Tom was arrested and charged with burglary and conspiracy and also with possession of a switchblade. Less than a week later the case was settled at intake. Two days after he was charged with burglary and conspiracy, Tom was picked up and charged with being drunk in public. The case was handled informally. A month later he was charged with disturbing the peace. Again, the case was handled informally.

At the age of 15 Tom was charged with possession of alcohol, marijuana and a dangerous weapon. Two weeks later, he was charged a second time for those offenses. He was placed on informal supervision which was dismissed three months later. During the period of supervision, Tom was once charged with violation of the informal supervision. The incident was handled at intake.

Six months after his informal supervision was dismissed, when Tom was 16, he was charged with school trespass, possession of a knife and possession of alcohol. Again the matter was handled at intake. Five months later Tom was again charged with school trespass. A

week later the matter was settled at intake. Less than three months later Tom stabbed two young men. One of them died a few hours later. Perhaps if Tom's comprehensive history had been compiled, with all agencies exchanging vital information, the outcome might have been different.

**The benefits of information-sharing**  
The creation of a system-wide approach to sharing information on chronic offenders can benefit the school community in several ways. First, if chronic offenders are identified, school officials can make the most appropriate classroom and counseling assignments, a step which would benefit both the juvenile and the school. Second, if schools are aware of the chronic offender, appropriate steps can be taken to ensure that other juveniles are protected from these offenders. This, of course, would enhance the environment for learning.

In addition, information-sharing would allow schools to help enforce probation requirements specifying a chronic offender may not interact with other offenders who are part of his group or gang. Once aware of such a probation restriction, schools could adjust student schedules to separate offenders as stipulated. If separate class schedules are not possible, an inter-district transfer could be made. This is a prime example of the mutual benefit of information-sharing among agencies. By knowing the identity of the chronic offender, schools are provided with the information necessary to facilitate creation of a safe campus environment. And excellence in education will only fully be realized in safe, secure schools.

**Conclusion: "Most kids are good - a few are very bad"**

Most juveniles are good, caring children. They can be counted on to do their work and interact effectively with other individuals in the school and community environments. Most juveniles never will have law enforcement-related problems. When juveniles do have a contact involving the violation of a law or policy, in most instances the situation can be handled quickly and informally. Usually, no additional

contact will ever be necessary.

However, there exists a very small core of youth who are responsible for much of the nation's crime. Senator Edward M. Kennedy, in a presentation to the International Chiefs of Police, referred to the crimes committed by the small number of youths as "the plague of juvenile violence." He added, "Juvenile crime is more than a fact of life today; it is a fact of death."<sup>6</sup>

These types of juveniles are also referred to in a Philadelphia research study which found "that less than 600 juveniles from approximately 500 families commit over 60 percent of the serious juvenile offenses in Philadelphia."<sup>7</sup>

According to criminologist Marvin E. Wolfgang, "There is a hard-core group of chronic delinquents with five or more offenses on record who kill, rape, rob and burglarize."<sup>8</sup>

Schools must recognize the chronic offender exists. Successful intervention strategies must be implemented to ensure the chronic offender does not negatively influence the school environment. The key to successfully responding to the problem of the chronic offender is *information*. Through system-wide cooperation focusing on the central role of the school, America can effectively address the problems caused by the chronic offender, both in our schools and in our community. □

\* *Although names have been changed, the profiles contained in this article are based on actual juvenile case files, focusing in depth on two juveniles who are typical chronic serious offenders.*

**Endnotes**

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2. Bureau of Justice Statistics. *Report to the Nation on Crime and Justice* (October 1983).
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