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About the cover:

Police and school security officers have become an integral part of many schools. Here Chicago policeman Howard Kilroy is surrounded by children outside Kosciuszko Elementary School. Photo copyright © 1989, the Times Mirror Company.

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BY P. KINGERY, E. MIRZAEI, B. PRUITT AND R. HURLEY

A new study by researchers at Texas A & M University indicates that violence and drug use are prevalent in our nation's rural schools.

Town and country violence

Violence and drug use in American schools have proven to be widespread problems affecting urban and rural areas alike. Findings from a Texas A & M University study released late this summer indicate that many rural public schools, particularly those near large cities, have even worse violence problems than the national average.

The continued presence of these problems in our nation's schools and their detrimental effects have contributed to a decline in the quality of the educational environment and have made them foremost concerns among principals and teachers. While teachers are occasionally targets of violent attacks, most acts of aggression in American schools are directed toward other students. Drugs often are directly or indirectly involved in these violent acts. The violence problem is more than a mere outgrowth of the drug problem, however, and merits closer attention than it has received in recent years.

Urban versus rural violence

Evidence presented in the National Institute of Education's landmark 1978 *Violent Schools — Safe Schools* report implied that a student is more likely to

Paul M. Kingery, Ph.D., Elaheh Mirzaee, Ph.D., B.E. Pruitt, Ed.D., and Robert S. Hurley, Ph.D., are professors at Texas A & M University.

be a victim of a physical attack in a big city school (2 percent chance in one month) than in a rural school (1.6 percent chance in one month). In 1979, serious levels of aggressive behavior were reported in 15 percent of schools in large cities, 6 percent in suburban areas and 4 percent in rural areas.

Many parents with sufficient economic means responded to such information by moving their children from inner-city schools to suburban schools or schools in small towns within commuting distance from a major metropolitan area. But not all of them found the idyllic rural life, free from the scourges of drugs and violence. Many found the effects of violence and drug abuse as great in rural areas as in urban areas.

The assumption that all less-populated regions have less problems with violence and drug abuse has caused these areas to be neglected both in studies of adolescent violence and drug use as well as in assistance to alleviate these problems. The Texas A & M University study, "Violence and Drug Use Among Adolescents: Beyond the Big City," was conducted in order to examine violence and its connection with drug abuse in one of these neglected regions.

Participants in the study were 1,004 eighth- and tenth-grade students from 23 small Central Texas communities. The majority of students were white (81.5 percent), although blacks (12.5 percent),

Hispanics (3.6 percent) and other racial groups (2.4 percent) also were represented in the sample. Boys (46.9 percent) and girls (53.1 percent) were represented in roughly equivalent numbers, as were eighth- (50.6 percent) and tenth-graders (49.4 percent). Students lived in communities with populations ranging from 40 to 6,808 that were located between 32 and 147 miles from Central Houston, Texas.

The instruments used for the study originally were devised for use in the 1987 National Adolescent Student Health Survey (NASH), a comprehensive investigation of the behavior, knowledge and attitudes of American teens on health issues. Only the sections dealing with drug use and violence were administered in this study. Violence-related questions examined the frequency of fighting, carrying weapons at school, entering situations involving high risk for violence, and access to handguns.

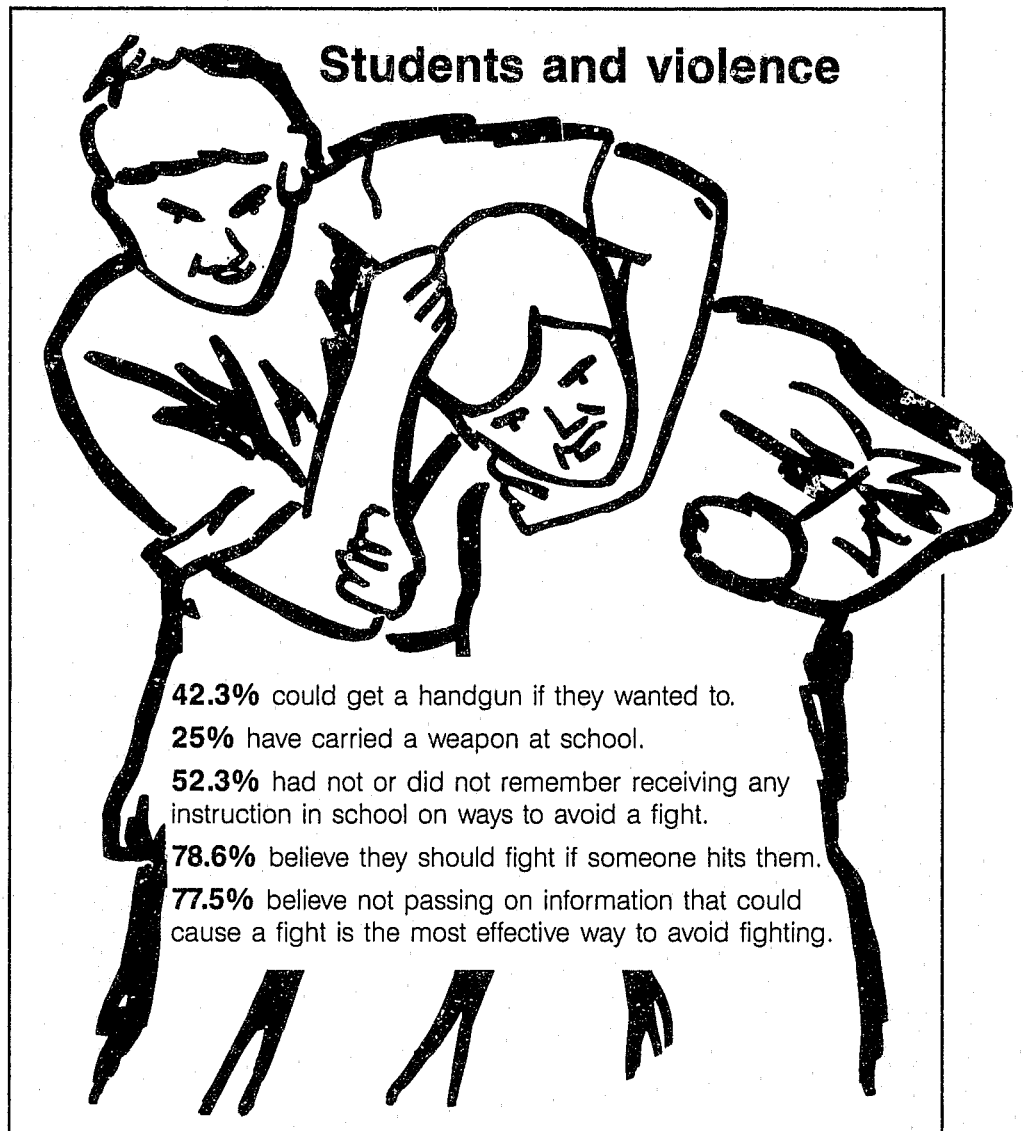
Also examined were the importance placed on what authority figures think about fighting, expectations of negative outcomes from fighting, beliefs about ways to avoid fighting, situations in which one feels he or she should fight, and the frequency of victimization both at school and outside of school supervision. Drug use was examined only to determine the frequency of using illegal drugs in order to study the relationship between drug use and violence.

Weapons on campus

More than half of the boys (53.2 percent) and one-fifth (20.5 percent) of girls reported having been in at least one physical fight involving weapons during the previous year, while 20.1 percent of boys and 6.4 percent of girls said they had been in three or more of such fights. One-fourth of the students (25 percent) said they had carried a weapon at school in the past year (40.8 percent of boys and 8.9 percent of girls). Almost 40 percent of boys and 7.7 percent of girls admitted carrying a knife at least once, while 19.0 percent of boys indicated they had carried a knife nearly every day. Slightly more than 6 percent of boys said they had carried a handgun — 1.6 percent of boys said they had carried one nearly every day — and 15.3 percent of boys reported carrying some other weapon. A large percentage of students (42.3 percent) said they could get a handgun if they wanted to.

Students frequently reported engaging in behaviors that placed them at high risk for becoming a victim of violence. Nearly three-fourths (71.7 percent) reported walking alone outside late at night during the past year, 58.0 percent said they had been to places known to be dangerous, and 37.5 percent indicated they let people see how much money they were carrying. One-fourth (26.5 percent) reported talking to strangers who tried to keep them from going on their way, 27.6 percent said they had walked alone through unsafe neighborhoods, 22.3 percent said they went out alone to sell items door-to-door, and 8.9 percent said they had hitchhiked with a stranger.

The serious negative outcomes from fighting often were overlooked by the students, with only about half expressing concern about what their parents or their schools would do if they were involved in fights. Nearly 53 percent considered what their parents think to be the most important influence in keeping them from fighting, followed by concerns about getting in trouble at school (51.3 percent), getting hurt (42.7 per-



- 42.3%** could get a handgun if they wanted to.
- 25%** have carried a weapon at school.
- 52.3%** had not or did not remember receiving any instruction in school on ways to avoid a fight.
- 78.6%** believe they should fight if someone hits them.
- 77.5%** believe not passing on information that could cause a fight is the most effective way to avoid fighting.

cent), and what their friends think (24.7 percent).

Most students thought they could be suspended from school for fighting; 66.7 percent said definitely or probably yes. A large percentage anticipated losing a friendship for fighting (47.8 percent), while fewer anticipated being injured badly enough to need medical care (31.5 percent), missing school or work because of injuries (25.1 percent), being sent to juvenile court (15.6 percent), or getting killed (14.7 percent).

Students believed that the most effective ways of avoiding fighting include not passing on information that could cause

a fight (77.5 percent said yes), ignoring or pretending not to hear an insult (69.9 percent), avoiding or walking away from someone who wants to fight (65.7 percent), dealing with the problem by talking (58.3 percent), and apologizing (51.7 percent). Many students had maladaptive coping responses to aggressors, such as threatening to use a weapon (25.0 percent), acting "tough" (16.9 percent), carrying a weapon (10.5 percent), and joining a gang for protection (9.3 percent).

Most students believed they should fight if someone hits them (78.6 percent), hurts someone they care about (74.2 percent), insults someone in their

family (58.6 percent), or breaks something of theirs on purpose (53.1 percent). Nearly half of the students thought they should fight if someone steals something from them (49.1 percent), insults them in front of their friends (29.2 percent), flirts with someone they like (28.8 percent), wants to fight them (18.6 percent), calls them a name (16.4 percent), or cuts in front of them in line (6.9 percent).

About one-fourth (23.2 percent) of the students surveyed indicated that they had used illegal drugs at least once in their lifetime (25.5 percent of boys and 21.7 percent of girls). The frequency of drug use was moderately related to the frequency of taking risks, of carrying a weapon at school, and of fighting.

Student victimization

While at school or on a school bus during the previous year, 34.1 percent of students reported having been threatened with bodily harm though not actually hurt, 15.2 percent claimed they had something taken from them by force or by threat of bodily harm, 14.1 percent said they had been physically attacked, and 6.8 percent admitted that someone tried to force them to have sex when they did not want to (7.1 percent of girls and 6.5 percent of boys).

Similarly, while outside of school supervision during the past year, 30.6 percent indicated they had been threatened with bodily harm though not actually hurt, 18.3 percent reported someone tried to force them to have sex when they did not want to (24.9 percent of girls and 10.9 percent of boys), 16.5 percent said they had been physically attacked, and 15.9 percent reported having something taken from them by force or by threat of bodily harm.

Students who took more risks, used drugs more frequently, and were victimized more often while at school or on a school bus more often were victims of violent behavior while outside of school supervision. A high frequency of victimization while at school or on the school bus was associated with a high frequency

of victimization while outside of school supervision, both for boys and girls. In addition, the frequency of victimization while outside of school supervision was related to the frequency of risk-taking and to the frequency of drug use. These results suggest that a unique group of students, characterized by their risk-taking and drug-abusing behavior, are the victims of violence both inside and outside of school supervision.

More than half (52.3 percent) of students said they either had not or did not remember receiving any instruction in school on ways to avoid fighting and violence. Both boys and girls who remembered receiving instruction on ways to avoid fighting did not differ in their reported involvement in violence, risk-taking, or in their beliefs about fighting

problems with violence than the average adolescent in America. Significantly more boys had carried a knife at school at least once in the previous 12 months in this sample (40 percent) than in the national (NASH) sample (23 percent). Boys in this study were twice as likely to carry handguns to school (6 percent said they had done so at least once in the past year) as compared to boys in the national study (3 percent for the same interval). Girls in this sample were more likely to have been pressured to have sex against their will while outside of school supervision (25 percent in the past year) than girls in the national study (18 percent in the past year).

The rural Texas schools surveyed in this sample may differ in some characteristics from rural schools in other

The disturbing truth is that adolescents are forced to cope by whatever means they can with a climate of violence that extends into our rural communities and schools.... Students may derive their coping strategies from their own and their friends' experiences outside the classroom.

from those who did not remember receiving the instruction.

Coping with a violent climate

The disturbing truth is that adolescents are forced to cope by whatever means they can with a climate of violence that extends into our rural communities and schools. Unfortunately, only half of students indicate that they receive instruction on ways to avoid violence and fighting, and those who receive the type and amount of instruction currently being given appear to derive no significant benefit from it. Instead of receiving sound instruction and training from teachers, students may derive their coping strategies from their own and their friends' experiences outside the classroom.

In some ways, the adolescents in these less-populated areas have even worse

regions. For example, rural schools located farther from a large metropolitan area may experience less violence. Students in the Texas sample are exposed to drug traffic that flows from the U.S. - Mexico border into the Houston region and on to Dallas, Austin and other cities. They are exposed to cultures that value "rugged self-reliance," and machismo runs high among them. Weapons are readily available as well. The link between these factors and violence is unproven, however, and the regional differences in levels of violence remain unexplored.

This study provides further evidence of the problem of violence in rural communities near a large metropolitan area, of the links between certain beliefs and violent behavior, and of the connection between drugs and violence. In the absence of adequate instruction and

Seeking American Heroes in Education

The Reader's Digest Association, Inc. is seeking nominations for its 1991 American Heroes in Education Awards, a national program to honor educators who are making a difference in U.S. schools. Winners from 10 schools will share \$150,000.

Individual teachers and principals, or teams of up to six educators, will receive \$5,000, with an additional \$10,000 going to their schools to support the activities that earned them national honors. In addition, up to five runner-up schools will be awarded \$2,000, with \$500 going to the individual or team.

Some 100,000 nomination forms have been sent to public, private and parochial schools across the nation. Any teacher, principal or administrator may nominate a fellow educator. Entry deadline is December 15, 1990.

George V. Grune, Reader's Digest chairman and chief executive officer, said, "Extraordinary contributions are made each day by ordinary teachers and principals. We want to find these unsung heroes, honor them and showcase their achievements to encourage educators everywhere to strive for their best."

The Reader's Digest American Heroes in Education Awards are sponsored jointly by The Reader's Digest Association, Inc., the American Federation of Teachers, National Education Association, National Association of

Elementary School Principals and National Association of Secondary School Principals.

Grune described the program's 1990 winners as "an inspiration to people everywhere." Last year's winners were recognized for:

- Creating safe, nurturing environments for students to learn and excel in, despite deteriorating neighborhoods.
- Decreasing drug and alcohol abuse.
- Motivating students to become actively involved in solving community problems.
- Improving student attendance and academic performance.
- Winning the support necessary to turn their schools into sources of community pride.

The 1991 nominations will be reviewed by a panel of distinguished educators and winners will be announced in April.

Nomination forms are available from local and national offices of sponsoring organizations or by contacting:

The Reader's Digest Association, Inc.
American Heroes in Education Awards
c/o Beth Jones
Pleasantville, NY 10572
914/241-5595

training, the enforcement of effective school violence policies, and prudent structuring of the school environment, students are carrying knives and other weapons rather than taking more appropriate forms of direct action to reduce their risk of victimization. They act in accord with their knowledge and beliefs about fighting and violence. Their knowledge is deficient, however, and their beliefs may predispose them to harm.

Prevention, intervention and response strategies are needed to address the violence occurring in small rural communities as well as in large urban areas. Because risk-taking is the common link between drug use and violence, interventions that identify high-risk behaviors and teach safety skills may be a good starting place. Students could be trained by demonstration and rehearsal how to

resist fighting and prevent being assaulted.

School policies regarding violent behavior must be strictly enforced and supported by the juvenile authorities. Yet these efforts are limited by school and criminal justice networks that are ill-equipped to handle the volume of violence cases they face. In addition, many rural communities seem unaware of the magnitude of the problem and are slow to allocate resources to combat the problem.

While the solutions to this school violence remain largely unproven, one thing is clear: These rural schools are not safe havens from the violence and drug problems seen in nearby large urban areas. Small communities afford little protection for our children, who are left to cope by whatever means they can within a climate of fear and violence.

Too many of our nation's young people have become victims while this problem continues to be ignored. □

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