

# Crime and Safety in America's Public Schools

U.S. Department of Education  
Institute of Education Sciences  
NCES 2004-370

## Selected Findings from the School Survey on Crime and Safety



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# CRIME AND SAFETY

## INTRODUCTION



*Crime and Safety in America's Public Schools: Selected Findings from the School Survey on Crime and Safety* summarizes important findings from the 1999–2000 School Survey on Crime and Safety (SSOCS). This document presents selected national estimates of the amount of crime, violence, and disorder at public schools, and the practices and programs that schools use to identify and diffuse potential problems. Much of this document was adapted from analyses that were presented in two NCES publications, *Violence in U.S. Public Schools: 2000 School Survey on Crime and Safety* (2004–314) or *Indicators of School Crime and Safety: 2003* (2004–004).


Data on crime, violence, and disorder in our nation's schools are collected so that policymakers, parents, and educators will have information to identify emerging problems, and gauge the safety of American schools. Information on crime, violence, and



disorder was collected in the 2000 SSOCS, a survey of public schools in the United States, sponsored by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). The 2000 SSOCS was a nationally representative sample of 2,270 regular public elementary, middle, secondary, and combined schools in the United States. Data from SSOCS helps to provide an overall picture of school crime and safety in the United States, by asking school principals about characteristics of school policies, school violence prevention programs and practices, violent deaths at school and elsewhere, frequency of crime and violence, disciplinary problems and actions, and school characteristics that have been associated with school crime.

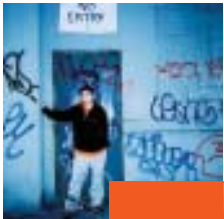
SSOCS data are published in a variety of reports. For more information about the survey, go to the SSOCS web site (<http://nces.ed.gov/surveys/ssocs/>) to find an overview, questionnaires, and reports that can be viewed or downloaded.

# IN AMERICA'S PUBLIC SCHOOLS

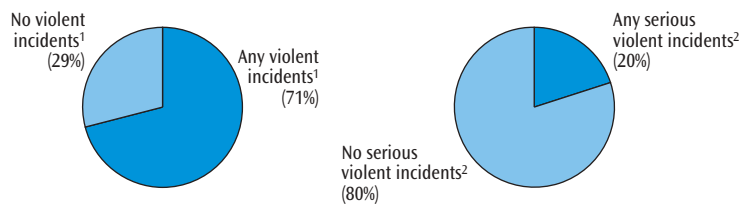
chools are entrusted with ensuring the safety of students and staff. One measure of the safety of America's public schools is the presence of violence on school campuses. Public school principals were presented with a list of crimes and asked to report the total number of incidents of each crime for the 1999–2000 school year, as well as the number of crimes that were reported to police or other law enforcement personnel. A subset of crimes collected in SSOCS were those that were violent in nature. These violent incidents included rape, sexual battery other than rape, physical attacks or fights with and without a weapon, threats of physical attack with and without a weapon, and robberies with and without a weapon. In order to provide a measure of the most severe incidents, those crimes that would be considered aggravated assaults were included as serious violent incidents. Serious violent incidents included rape, sexual battery other than rape, physical attacks or fights with a weapon, threats of physical attack with a weapon, and robberies either with or without a weapon.

In 1999–2000, 71 percent of public elementary and secondary schools experienced at least one violent incident (figure 1). Approximately 1.5 million violent incidents occurred in about 59,000 public schools that year. Thirty-six percent of public schools reported at least one violent incident to police or other law enforcement personnel during the 1999–2000 school year (figure 2). Of the 1.5 million violent incidents that occurred at school, around 257,000 were reported to the police.

The most serious violence was experienced by a smaller percentage of schools. Twenty percent of public schools experienced at least one serious violent incident (including rape, sexual battery other than rape, physical attacks or fights with a weapon, threats of physical attack with a weapon, and robberies either with or without a weapon), for a total of 61,000 serious violent incidents (figure 1). Schools experiencing serious violence were likely to involve police. The majority of those schools that experienced a serious violent incident reported at least one of those incidents to the police or law enforcement personnel (figure 2). Specifically, of the 20 percent of schools with at least one serious violent incident, 15 percent of schools reported a serious violent incident to the police. This means 75 percent of schools that had a serious violent incident reported at least one of those incidents to the authorities.



**Figure 1. Percentage of public schools that experienced violent and serious violent incidents: 1999–2000**



<sup>1</sup>Violent incidents include rape, sexual battery other than rape, physical attack or fight with or without a weapon, threat of physical attack with or without a weapon, and robbery with or without a weapon.

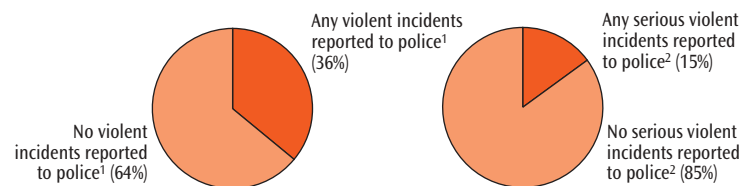
<sup>2</sup>Serious violent incidents include rape, sexual battery other than rape, physical attack or fight with a weapon, threat of physical attack with a weapon, and robbery with or without a weapon.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, School Survey on Crime and Safety (SSOCS), 2000. (Estimates previously published in tables 1 and 2 of *Violence in U.S. Public Schools: 2000 School Survey on Crime and Safety* [NCES 2004–314].)

The 2000 SSOCS asked principals about a variety of crimes in addition to those that were violent. In 1999–2000, schools were more likely to have experienced at least one physical attack or fight without a weapon than any other type of crime (64 percent) (figure 3). Threats of physical attack without a weapon (52 percent) and vandalism (51 percent) were the

second most reported crimes during 1999–2000, followed by theft or larceny (46 percent), and possession of a knife or sharp object (43 percent). Of those crimes presented to principals, sexual battery other than rape (2 percent), rape or attempted rape (1 percent), and robbery with a weapon (0 percent) were least likely to occur at school.

**Figure 2. Percentage of public schools that reported violent and serious violent incidents to police: 1999–2000**

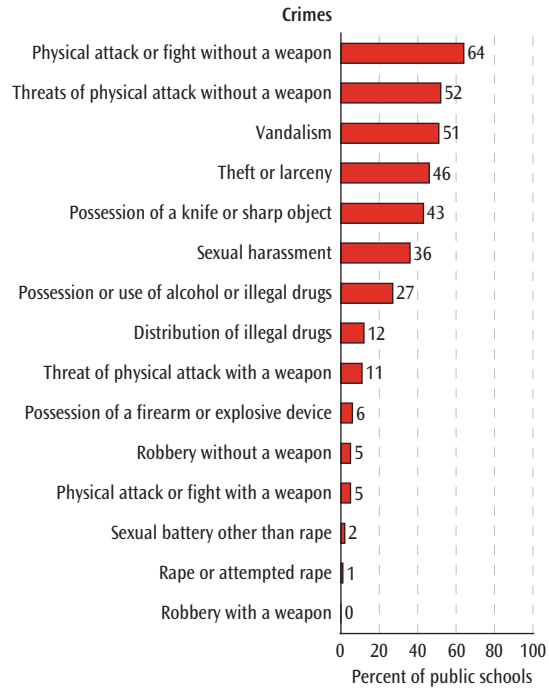


<sup>1</sup>Violent incidents include rape, sexual battery other than rape, physical attack or fight with or without a weapon, threat of physical attack with or without a weapon, and robbery with or without a weapon.

<sup>2</sup>Serious violent incidents include rape, sexual battery other than rape, physical attack or fight with a weapon, threat of physical attack with a weapon, and robbery with or without a weapon.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, School Survey on Crime and Safety (SSOCS), 2000. (Estimates previously published in tables 1 and 2 of *Violence in U.S. Public Schools: 2000 School Survey on Crime and Safety* [NCES 2004–314].)

Figure 3. Percentage of public schools with specific crimes: 1999–2000



SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, School Survey on Crime and Safety (SSOCS), 2000. (Estimates previously published in tables 3, 4, 5, and 6 of *Violence in U.S. Public Schools: 2000 School Survey on Crime and Safety* [NCES 2004–314].)





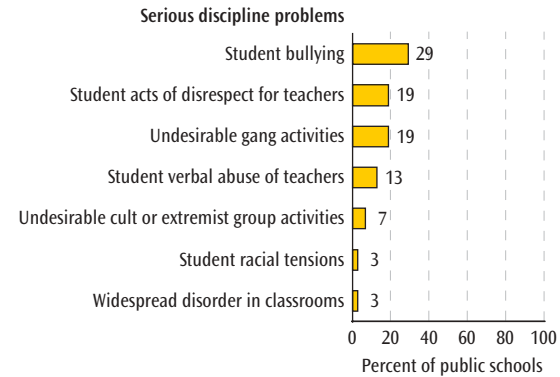


Disciplinary problems in school can lead to school disorder that distracts from the ability of teachers to teach and students to learn. A selection of discipline problems were included in the 1999–2000 SSOCS, and principals were asked to report with what frequency those problems occurred at school. The discipline problems included student racial tensions, student bullying, student verbal abuse of teachers, widespread disorder in classrooms, student acts of disrespect for teachers, undesirable gang activities, and undesirable cult or extremist group activities. The level of frequency that a principal reported was used to determine whether the school had a serious problem. Student racial tensions, student bullying, student verbal abuse of teachers, widespread disorder in classrooms, and student acts of disrespect for teachers were considered a serious discipline problem if they were reported to occur daily or weekly. Undesirable gang and cult or extremist group activities were considered a serious discipline problem if they happened at all during the school year.

In 1999–2000, schools were more likely to have a serious problem with student bullying than with any other discipline problem (29 percent). Student acts of disrespect for teachers and undesirable gang activities (19 percent each) were the second most reported serious problems for public schools.

Among the other discipline problems reported, 13 percent of schools reported student verbal abuse of teachers, 7 percent of schools reported undesirable cult or extremist group activities, and 3 percent of schools reported student racial tensions and widespread disorder in classrooms.

**Figure 4. Percentage of public schools that reported selected discipline problems at school as serious: 1999–2000**



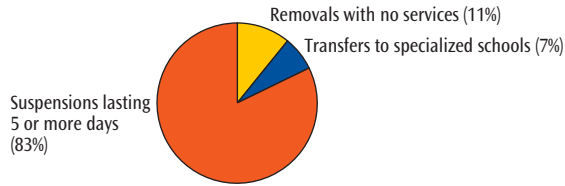
SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, School Survey on Crime and Safety (SSOCS), 2000. (Estimates previously published in figure 16.1 of *Indicators of School Crime and Safety: 2003* [NCES 2004–004].)



Principals were asked to report the number of disciplinary actions taken for specific offenses during the 1999–2000 school year. Serious disciplinary actions included suspensions lasting 5 days or more, removals from school with no continuing services (i.e., expulsions), and transfers to specialized schools. About 54 percent

of public schools took a serious disciplinary action for any of the specified offenses that occurred in the 1999–2000 school year, for a total of about 1,163,000 actions. Of those serious disciplinary actions, 83 percent were suspensions (for 5 days or more), 11 percent were removals with no services, and 7 percent were transfers to specialized schools (figure 5).

**Figure 5. Percentage distribution of serious disciplinary actions taken by public school principals according to type of action: 1999–2000**



NOTE: Detail may not sum to total because of rounding.

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, School Survey on Crime and Safety (SSOCS), 2000. (Estimates previously published in figure 8.1 of *Indicators of School Crime and Safety: 2003* [NCES 2004–004].)

Two percent of all public schools took a serious disciplinary action for the use of a firearm or explosive device, and 4 percent did so for the possession of such a device. Use of weapons other than firearms resulted in a serious disciplinary action in 5 percent of schools, while possession of weapons other than firearms led to an action in 19 percent of schools.

Ten percent of all public schools took a serious disciplinary action for the distribution of illegal drugs, and 20 percent for the possession or use of illegal drugs or alcohol. In 1999–2000, public schools also reported other reasons for taking serious disciplinary actions in their schools, including fights (35 percent), threats (22 percent), insubordination (18 percent), and other infractions not including academic ones (14 percent).



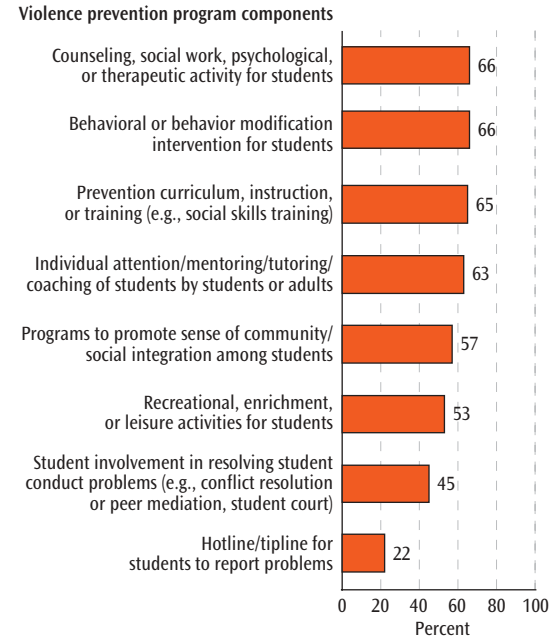
## VIOLENCE PREVENTION PROGRAMS FOR STUDENTS



One approach to reducing the level of crime and violence in schools is to provide students with training intended to prevent certain behaviors. Principals were asked about specific components of formal student programs to prevent or reduce violence at their school. During the 1999–2000 school year, the most frequently reported program components were counseling, social work, psychological, or therapeutic activity (66 percent); behavioral or behavior modification intervention (66 percent); prevention curriculum, instruction, or training (65 percent); and individual attention, mentoring, tutoring, or coaching by students or adults (63 percent) (figure 6). Over half of schools (57 percent) reported the next most common program component, which was programs to promote a sense of community or social integration among students. The program component provided in the survey least reported by school principals was a hotline or tipline for students to report problems (22 percent).



Figure 6. Percentage of public schools with specific violence prevention program components for students: 1999–2000



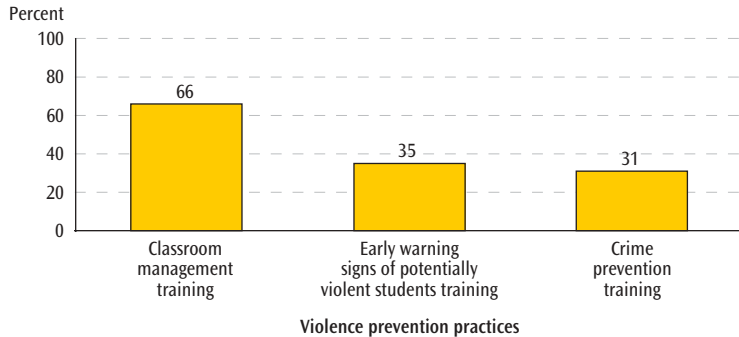
SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, School Survey on Crime and Safety (SSOCS), 2000.

## Teachers

**A**nother approach to crime and violence prevention that schools employed was to provide training to teachers and staff. Some types of teacher training included classroom management, crime prevention, and recognition of early warning signs of potentially

violent students. In the 1999–2000 school year, 66 percent of schools reported that they trained, supervised, or offered technical assistance in classroom management for teachers, 35 percent trained teachers or aides to recognize early warning signs of potentially violent students, and 31 percent trained faculty and staff in crime prevention (figure 7).

**Figure 7. Percentage of public schools that train staff in specific violence prevention practices: 1999–2000**



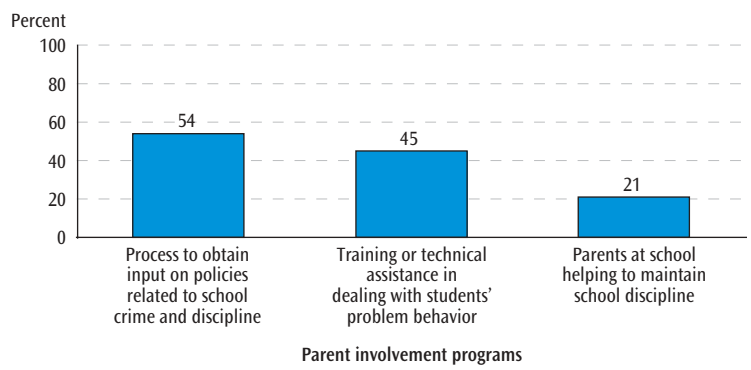
SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, School Survey on Crime and Safety (SSOCS), 2000.

## Parents

**I**n addition to training students, teachers, and staff about violence prevention, many schools involved parents in crime reduction efforts. Schools may seek feedback from parents on school policies or formalize programs or training in issues related to school disorder. During 1999–2000, schools were more likely to obtain input from parents about policies related to school crime and discipline (54 percent) than either to offer training or technical assistance to parents in dealing with students’ problem behavior (45 percent), or to have a program that involved parents at school helping to maintain discipline (21 percent) (figure 8).



Figure 8. Percentage of public schools with selected parent involvement programs: 1999–2000



SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, School Survey on Crime and Safety (SSOCS), 2000.

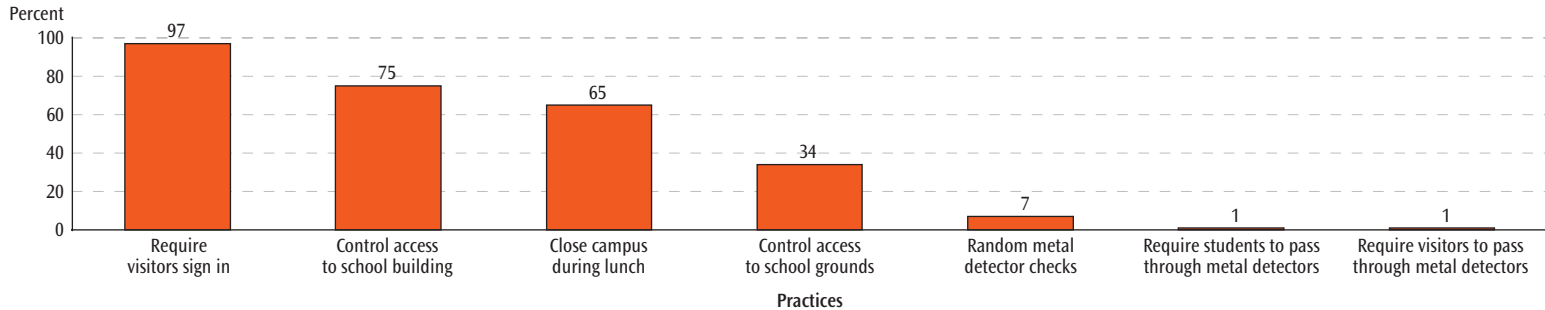




Schools typically employ specific practices and procedures designed to ensure the safety of the students and staff. Some of these practices are intended to limit the access that people have to school campuses, while other practices monitor people's behavior once they are on campus. SSOCS asked principals about a variety of practices that schools utilized during the 1999–2000 school year. Figure

9 shows those practices that schools used to limit access to school campuses. The vast majority of public schools required visitors to sign or check in when entering the school building (97 percent), while few schools required that either students or visitors pass through metal detectors (1 percent).

Figure 9. Percentage of public schools that limit access to campus with selected practices: 1999–2000



SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, School Survey on Crime and Safety (SSOCS), 2000.

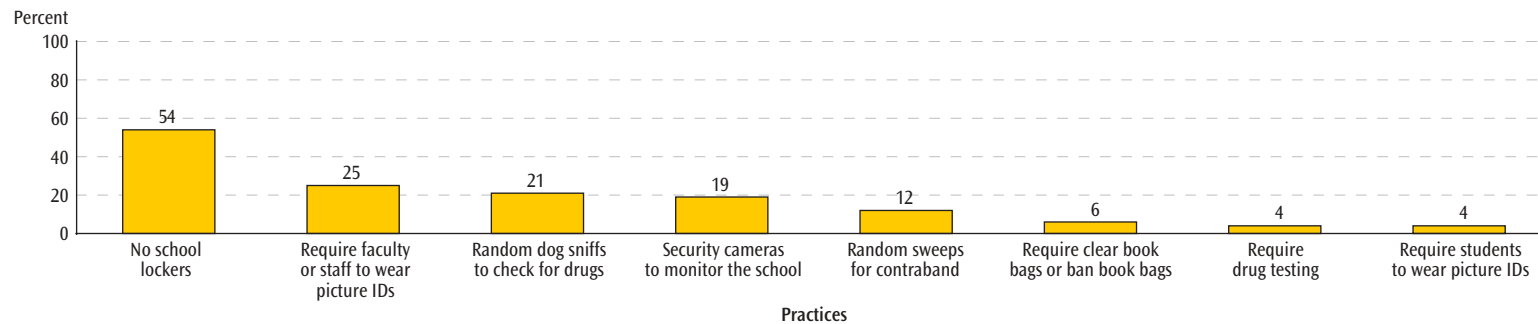




chools use different security measures to monitor the activities of those within the school building. Some of these security measures may include using technology to monitor the school grounds, searching or testing for drugs, or limiting the amount of space available for concealing weapons or drugs. In 1999–2000, schools used a variety of practices to prevent or reduce specific behaviors. Schools were more likely not to provide lockers to students than any other practice used to monitor activities (54 percent) (figure 10). A similar practice is for

schools to require clear book bags or ban book bags entirely, which was used by fewer schools (6 percent). While 25 percent of schools required faculty or staff to wear picture IDs, only 4 percent of schools had the same requirement for students. In order to reduce the presence of drugs at school, 21 percent of schools used random dog sniffs, 12 percent of schools had random sweeps for contraband, and 4 percent of schools required drug testing for any students. Finally, 19 percent of schools used security cameras to monitor the school.

**Figure 10. Percentage of public schools that monitor campus with selected practices: 1999–2000**



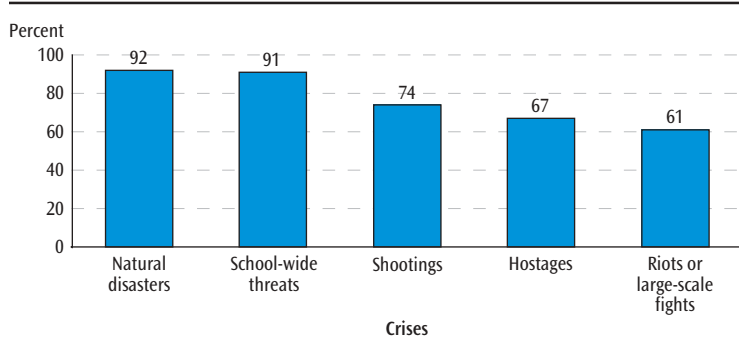
SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, School Survey on Crime and Safety (SSOCS), 2000.



It is important that schools are prepared to respond in the event of a crisis. One action taken by schools is to have a written plan that details the procedures that are to be performed in the event of a crisis. During the 1999–2000 school year, 96 percent of schools had a written plan for at least one of the following crises: shootings, riots or large-scale fights, schoolwide threats such as

bomb or anthrax scares, natural disasters, or hostages. Schools were more likely to have a written plan for natural disasters (92 percent) and bomb scares, anthrax scares, or comparable schoolwide threats (91 percent) than other types of crises (figure 11). In addition, more than half of schools had a written plan for shootings (74 percent), hostages (67 percent), and riots or large-scale fights (61 percent).

**Figure 11. Percentage of public schools with a written crisis management plan: 1999–2000**



SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, School Survey on Crime and Safety (SSOCS), 2000.





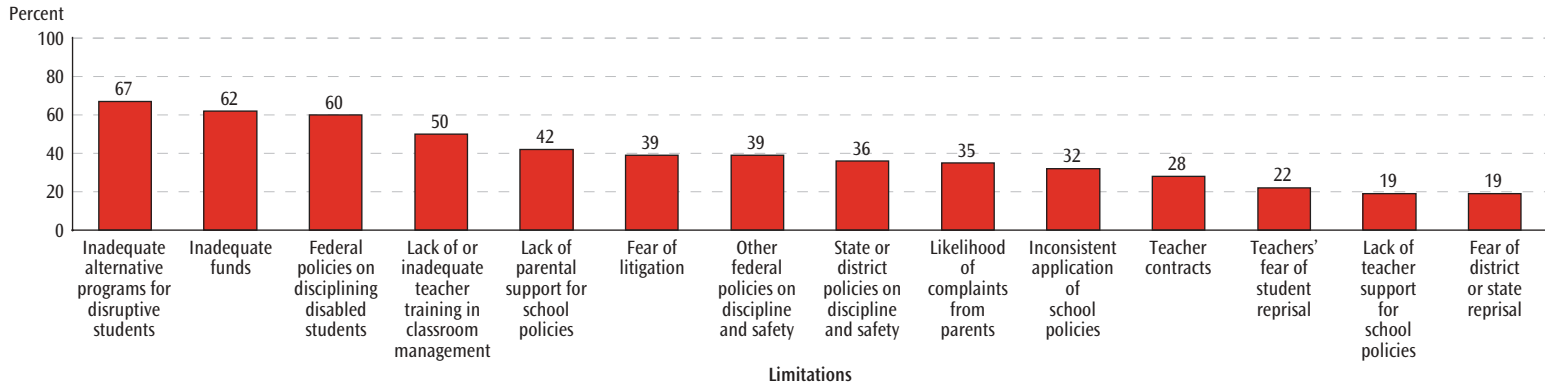
## BARRIERS TO SAFE SCHOOLS



While programs and policies may help in reducing crime and violence in schools, some factors serve as limitations to crime reduction or prevention efforts. In 1999–2000, principals reported that a wide variety of factors limited their schools' efforts to reduce or prevent crime. Among those limiting factors, principals were most likely to report the lack of alternative placements or programs for disruptive students as a limitation to reducing or preventing crime

(67 percent) (figure 12). Inadequate funding (62 percent) and federal policies on disciplining disabled students (60 percent) were the second most frequently reported limitations by school principals, followed by the lack of or inadequate teacher training in classroom management (50 percent). A lack of teacher support for school policies (19 percent) and a fear of district or state reprisal (19 percent) were reported as limitations by the fewest principals.


**Figure 12. Percentage of public schools that reported that specific factors limited their ability to reduce or prevent crime: 1999–2000**



SOURCE: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, School Survey on Crime and Safety (SSOCS), 2000.


# FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT SSOCS

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 The School Survey on Crime and Safety (SSOCS) is the National Center for Education Statistics' sample survey of the nation's public schools designed to provide estimates of school crime, discipline, disorder, and programs and policies related to crime and disorder. SSOCS is administered to public elementary, middle, secondary, and combined school principals during the Spring of a school year.

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## Who participates in SSOCS?

 Over 3,000 public school principals are selected to receive the SSOCS questionnaire. The SSOCS sample is large enough to provide national estimates of all public schools, while taking into account the level of instruction, type of location, and size of the student enrollment.

## When is SSOCS administered?

 SSOCS is administered at the end of the school year to allow principals to report the most complete information possible. SSOCS was first administered to principals in April of the 1999–2000 school year. The next administration of SSOCS will be in the Spring of the 2003–04 school year.

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## What topics are covered by SSOCS?

**7** The SSOCS questionnaire asks principals to report on a variety of topics related to crime and safety, including the following:

- Characteristics of school policies and procedures,
- School violence prevention programs and practices,
- Use of law enforcement personnel or security services,
- Frequency of criminal incidents at school,
- Frequency of incidents reported to police or law enforcement,
- Frequency of hate-related and gang-related incidents,
- Disciplinary problems and disciplinary actions, and
- Other school characteristics related to school crime.

## Where can I learn more about SSOCS and other crime and safety data collections?

**S** OCS data are published in a variety of reports. For more information about the survey, go to the SSOCS web site (<http://nces.ed.gov/ssocs>) to find an overview, questionnaires, and reports that can be viewed or downloaded.

While SSOCS collects information from school principals, NCES also administers surveys to students, teachers, and parents. Information about SSOCS and other NCES school crime surveys can be found at <http://nces.ed.gov/programs/crime>.



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