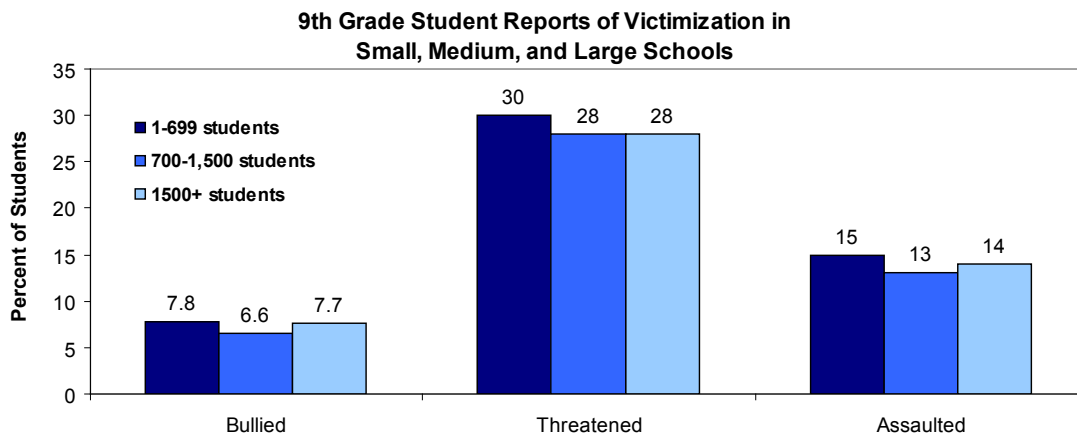


Practical Findings from the Virginia High School Safety Study

Do larger schools really have more student bullying and victimization?

Issue 9

There is a widely accepted view that larger schools are less safe environments than smaller schools. In our sample of 290 Virginia high schools, we examined the effects of school size using hierarchical multiple regression to control statistically for the influence of other school demographics (student poverty, minority composition, urbanicity). We found that 9th grade students and teachers reported that they observed more bullying and teasing taking place in larger schools than smaller schools. And in fact, there were more incidents of student victimization in larger schools, according to school discipline records. However, one can expect more incidents of student victimization simply because there were more students. Most importantly, when we examined the rates of bullying, threats, and physical assault, using both students' reports and school discipline records, there were no positive correlations with school size. Simply put, students were not at greater risk of victimization in a larger school. Factors such as student body poverty and minority composition had a small positive association with victimization rates, but contrary to popular perception, urban location was negatively correlated with assault. Although these other school demographics generated significant statistical effects, school size did not matter. The chart below is a simple representation of the percentage of 9th grade students who reported being bullied, verbally threatened, or physically assaulted in the past month in 89 small (1-699), 97 medium (700-1,500) and 104 large (1,500+) schools.



Practical Suggestions. School size by itself does not place students at greater risk for being bullied, threatened, or assaulted. Students may feel less safe in larger schools because they observe or hear about such incidents more frequently. This phenomenon is analogous to citizens who hear frequent news reports of violent crimes because they live in large cities and consequently believe they are at increased risk of being a crime victim, even though the violent crime rates might be lower than some smaller communities. From a school safety perspective, more important than the size of the school is the staffing level of the school and the proportion of students who may be at increased risk for school difficulties.

Study Overview. The Virginia High School Safety Study was designed to identify effective policies and practices in Virginia public high schools. Student victimization was measured using school discipline records (grades 9-12) and surveys of approximately 7,400 9th grade students and 2,900 9th grade teachers in 294 schools. This is a correlational study that can support, but not prove, causal relationships. The VHSSS was conducted by Dewey Cornell, Anne Gregory, Xitao Fan, and Peter Sheras of the Curry School of Education in collaboration with the Virginia Department of Education and Virginia Center for School Safety of the Department of Criminal Justice Services. The findings in Issue 9 are derived from a predissertation project conducted by Jennifer Klein. The study was funded by the U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. Study conclusions do not necessarily reflect policies or recommendations of these state and federal agencies. For more information, see the website for the Virginia Youth Violence Project: <<http://youthviolence.edschool.virginia.edu>>.