

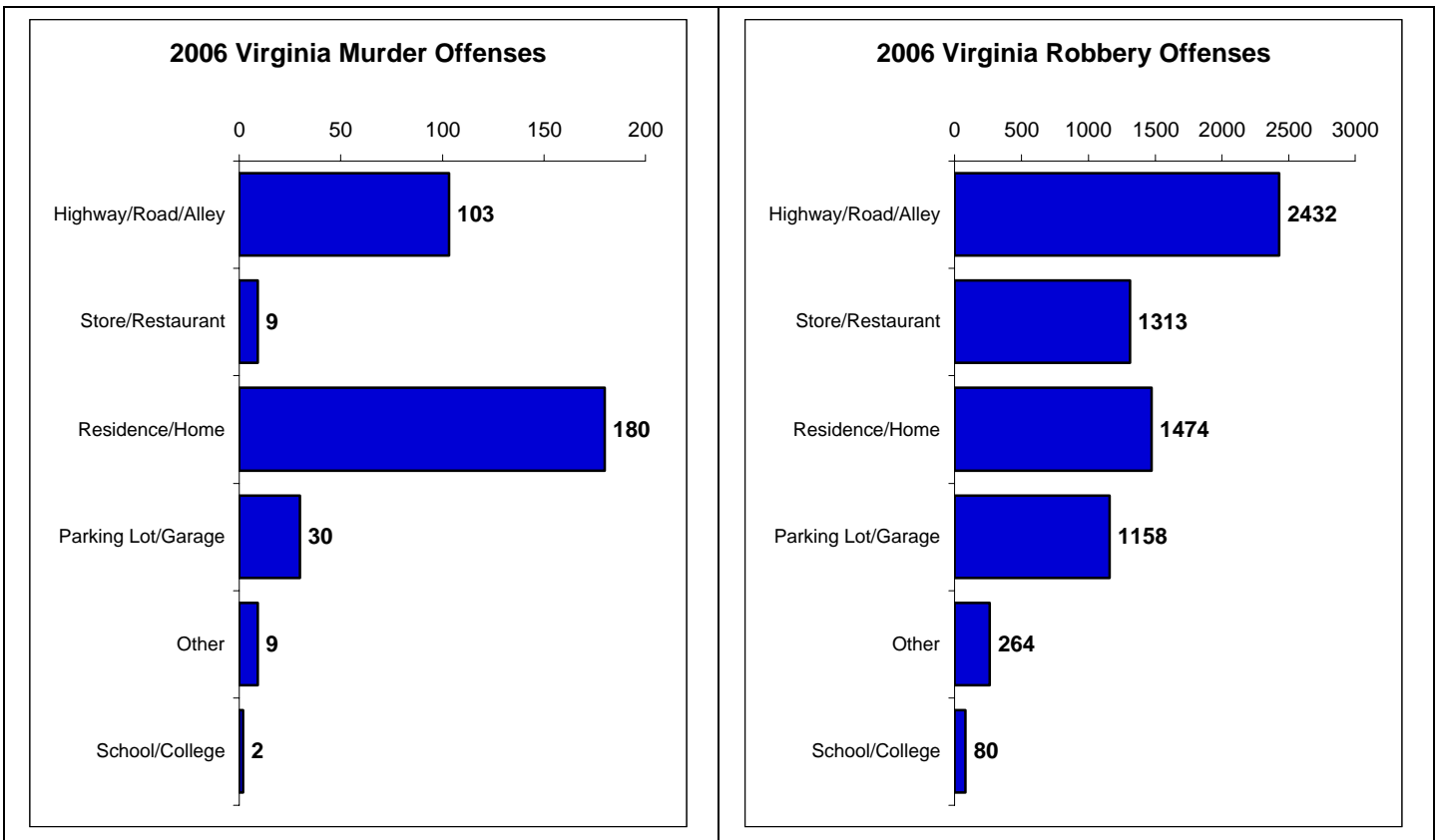
Virginia Crimes and School Discipline Infractions

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The highly publicized school shootings of the 1990s generated nationwide concern about school safety. The Virginia Tech shooting extended this concern to colleges as well. However, policy decisions about school safety must be based on objective information, not fears based on extreme cases. Here is a brief overview of violent crimes and school discipline infractions in Virginia that support a different conclusion: namely, that Virginia schools are safe places and that student violence resulting in injury to others is rare. The most common incidents at school involve disrespectful or disruptive behavior, followed by fights and threats that do not result in injury.

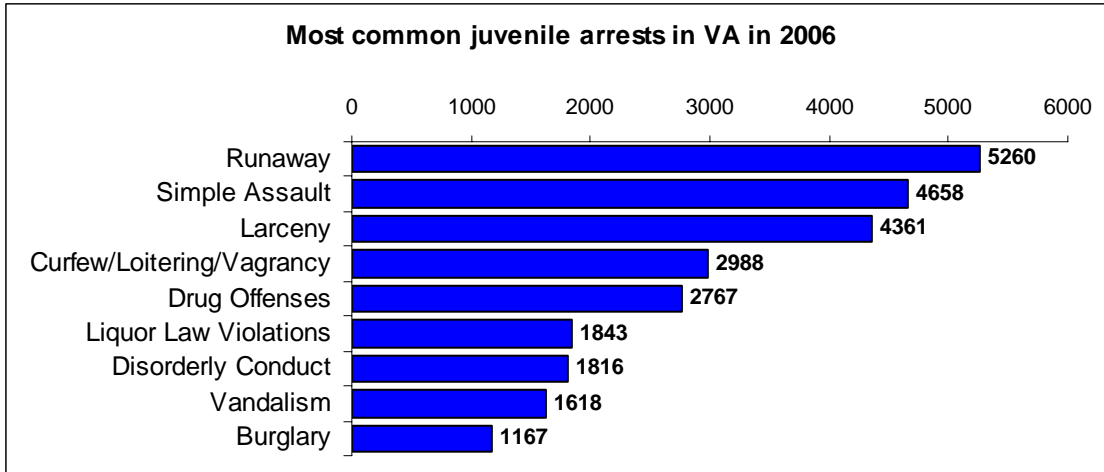
Where do violent crimes occur?

According to offense statistics from the Virginia Department of State Police (2006), relatively few violent crimes occur in schools or colleges. Certainly the Virginia Tech shooting will alter the statistics for 2007, but a single aberrant incident does not indicate a major shift in crime trends.



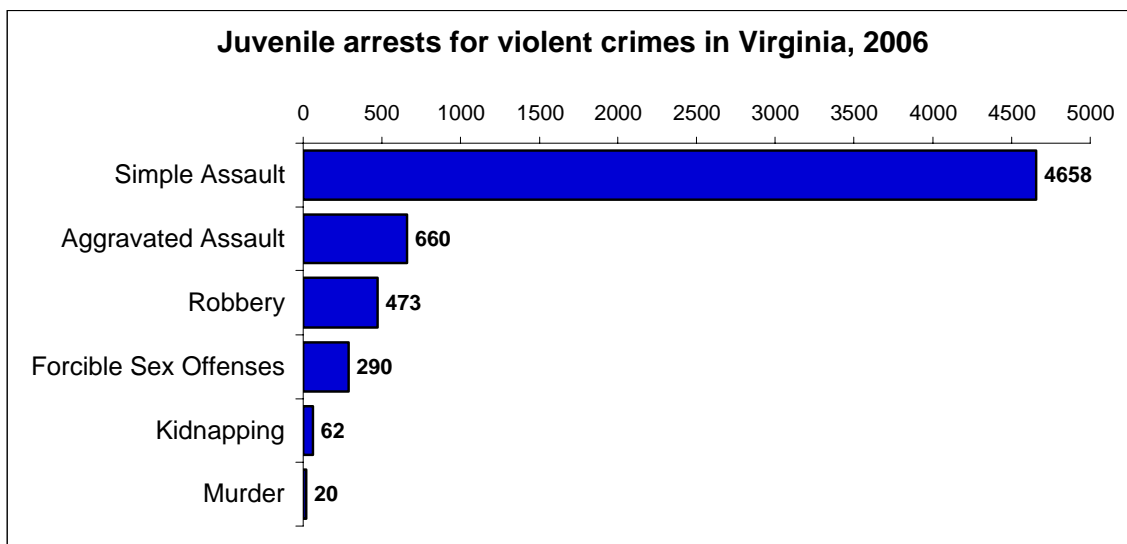
What are juveniles arrested for in Virginia?

In 2006, there were 314,843 arrests in Virginia (Virginia State Police, 2006). Only about 12% (38,599) of those arrests involved juveniles. The most common reason for a juvenile arrest was simple assault, followed by larceny and running away.



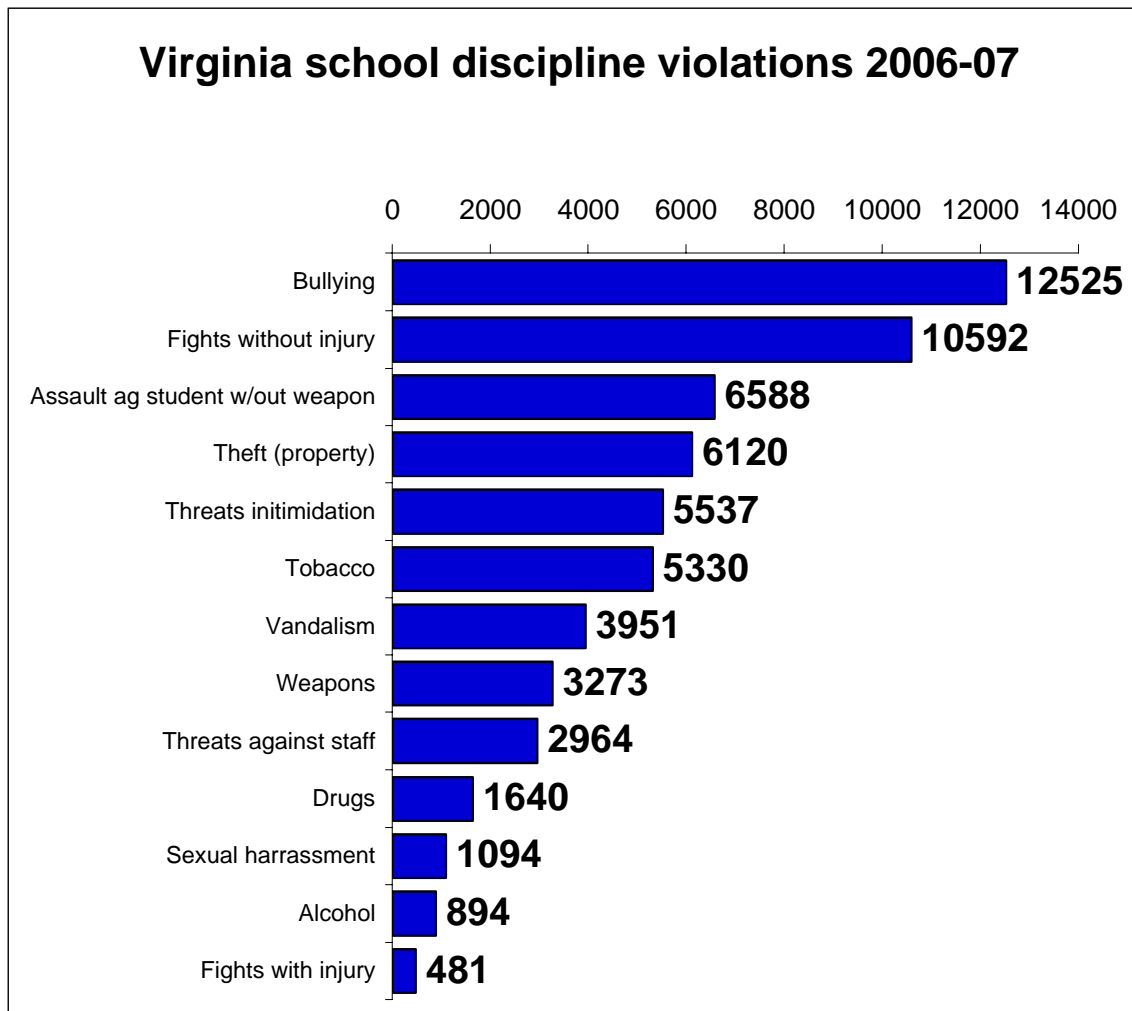
How many juveniles are arrested for violent crimes in Virginia?

Juveniles commit relatively few serious crimes, for example only 7% of the murders and 12% of the aggravated assaults.



What kind of discipline violations occur in Virginia schools?

Virginia has 1,986 public schools serving 1,221,939 students. Each of Virginia's school divisions is required to maintain records of disciplinary violations and make an annual report to the Virginia Department of Education (2006). Although there are some differences across schools and school divisions in how they identify disciplinary violations and maintain their records, some general trends are evident. There were a total of 371,933 incidents, which is slightly more than one incident for every three students (of course most students have no violations and a small number of students will have many violations). The majority of discipline violations are classified as "disorderly conduct" (15.37% or 57,159 violations). The table below presents the most common types of incidents that are not classified as disorderly conduct. The most frequent of these incidents are "bullying" and "fights without injury." There are relatively few incidents involving injury to others.

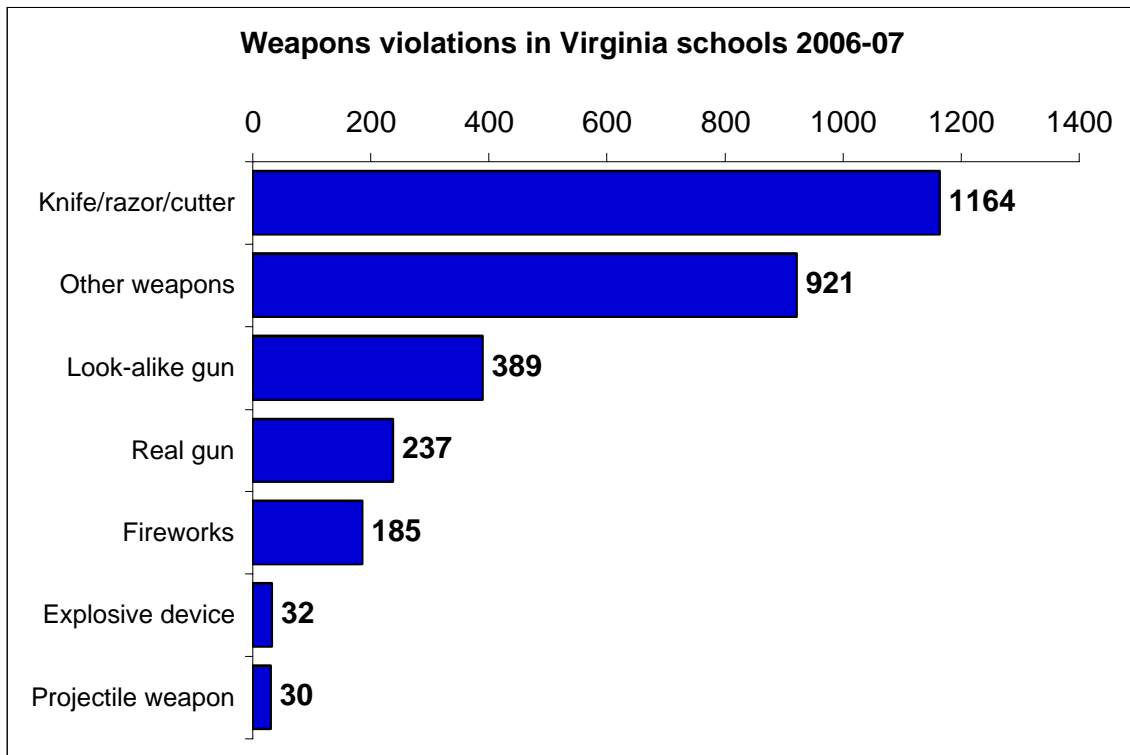


What kinds of weapon violations occur in Virginia schools?

Weapon violations (3,273) make up less than 1% of the discipline violations in Virginia schools, but they are important because of the potential for serious injury and their effect on school climate. As shown in the table below, weapon incidents most commonly involve a knife (including razors and box cutters) and rarely involve a firearm. The large category of “other weapons” (WP9 in the state classification) can include knives, stun weapons, clubs, pepper spray, etc.

There are far more look-alike guns (toys) than real guns. Moreover, even the category of “real” guns may be misleading. Of the 237 incidents involving an object that was formally classified as a “real gun”, just 34 were handguns and 8 were rifle/shotguns. There were 195 were classified as “other firearms,” a category (WP8) that includes air rifles and BB guns. Few incidents involving real guns took place in elementary schools, although junior/middle schools have about as many as high schools.

In recent years, Virginia has reported an unusually high rate of expulsions for firearm violations under federal Gun-Free school Act, in comparison to other states. In part, this high rate may be due to some confusion between the state and federal definitions of firearms. Although Virginia’s *state* classification system includes air rifles and BB guns in the category of “other firearms,” the *federal* Gun-Free Schools Act specifically excludes toy guns, cap guns, bb guns, and pellet guns from its definition of a firearm, and therefore the federal law does *not* mandate expulsion for possession of such objects (Virginia Department of Education, 2006).



How dangerous are our schools?

Schools are not dangerous places. The perception that schools are dangerous is a misperception generated by a series of extreme, high profile cases that are not representative of most schools. In fact, very few violent crimes take place at school. From the standpoint of violent crime, students are safer at school than at home. Moreover, schools have become even safer during the past decade such that the serious violent crime rate at school is less than half what it was in 1994 (see the companion article, “Myths about youth violence and school safety”). Although there are relatively few serious violent crimes at school, there are many less serious crimes and there are numerous discipline problems—primarily disorderly conduct and fights that do not result in injuries—that demand attention. Bullying, teasing, and harassment are common problems that deserve attention in every school, too. School policies and practices must be focused on the sorts of problems that actually occur in schools.

References

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The Virginia Youth Violence Project is a program of the Curry School of Education at the University of Virginia. For more information:
<http://youthviolence.edschool.virginia.edu/>