

Myths about youth violence and school safety

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The highly publicized school shootings of the 1990's generated nationwide concern about the safety of our schools. The news media focused national attention on little-known places such as Pearl, Mississippi; Paducah, Kentucky; and Jonesboro, Arkansas where young boys opened fire on their classmates. In 1999, Columbine High School became the best-known high school in America when two boys went on a shooting rampage that killed twelve students and a teacher before they killed themselves. Live television coverage of the Columbine tragedy began while students were still hiding in the school and police were attempting to find the shooters. In the following weeks the American public was exposed to numerous images of bloody victims and interviews with traumatized, grief-stricken survivors.

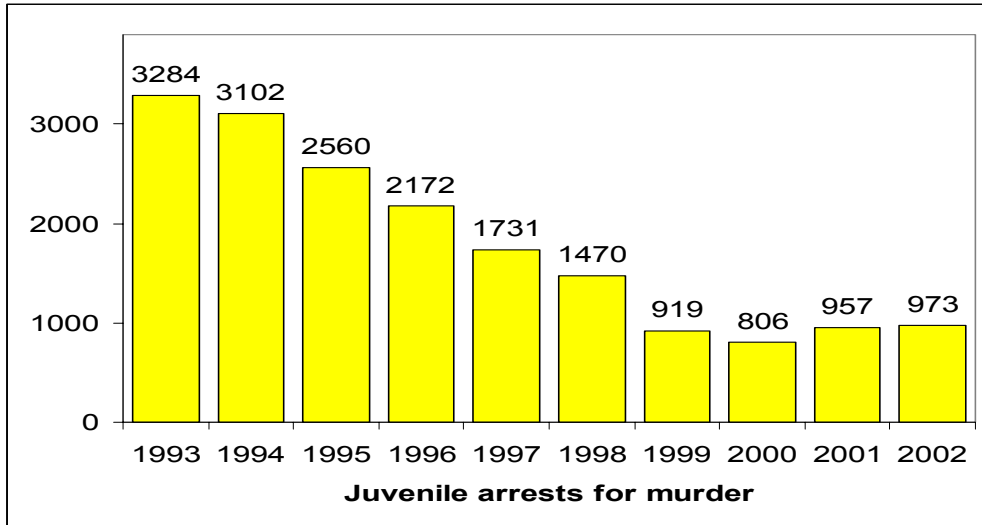
There was a dramatic national response to the school shootings. Both the U.S. Senate and the House of Representatives held hearings on youth violence, the White House held a conference on school violence, and both the FBI and Secret Service conducted studies of school shootings (O'Toole, 2000; Vossekuil, Fein, Reddy, Borum, & Modzeleski, 2002). The U.S. Department of Education distributed "warning signs" guidebooks to schools giving advice on identifying potentially violent students (Dwyer, Osher, & Warger, 1998) and the U.S. Surgeon General (2001) released a major report on youth violence. Less obvious, but even more important, local school authorities across the country adopted new security measures, implemented tougher zero tolerance policies, and greatly expanded their use of school resource officers and school security officers.

Although the school shootings stimulated new attention to the problem of school safety and brought about many positive changes in relationships between schools and law enforcement agencies, *public perceptions are easily skewed by media attention to a handful of extreme cases*. The school shootings frightened the public and generated a widespread belief that there was an epidemic of violence in our schools. As the facts presented here demonstrate, this epidemic was a myth. School violence did not increase in the 1990's, it declined.

Consequently, it is important to guard against fear-based perceptions of school violence. Policy decisions about school safety must be based on objective information. School administrators and policy-makers must maintain a rational and factual perspective on school safety. Here are five myths about youth violence and school safety that threaten to distort school safety policy and practices:

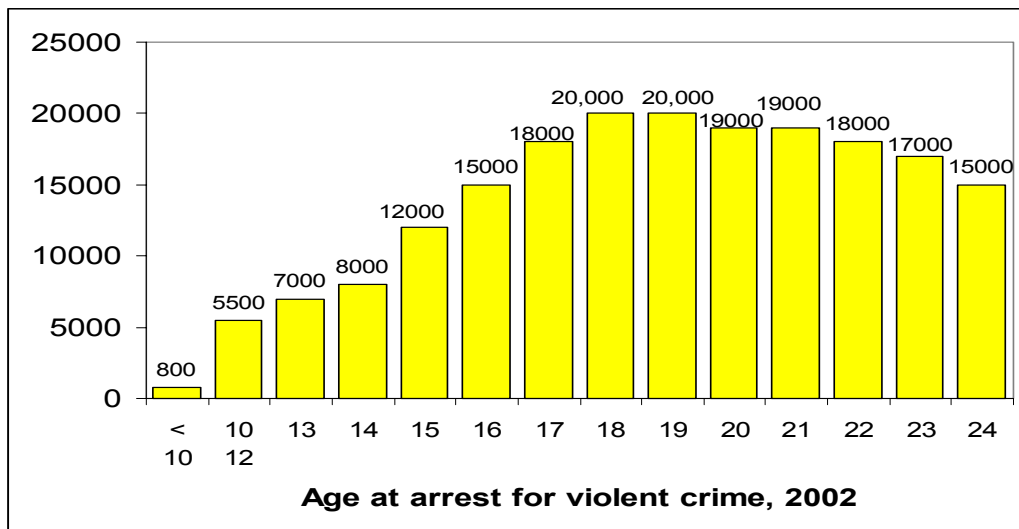
Myth 1. Juvenile violence is increasing.

Facts: According to FBI national arrest statistics, the arrest rate of juveniles for violent crime (murder, robbery, rape, and aggravated assault) peaked in 1994 and has declined each year since then (Snyder, 2004). This rate is lower now than in any year since at least 1980. The most dramatic decline in juvenile violence is seen for homicides, the category with the most complete and reliable data. As shown below, there were more than three times as many juveniles arrested for murder in 1993 than in 2002.



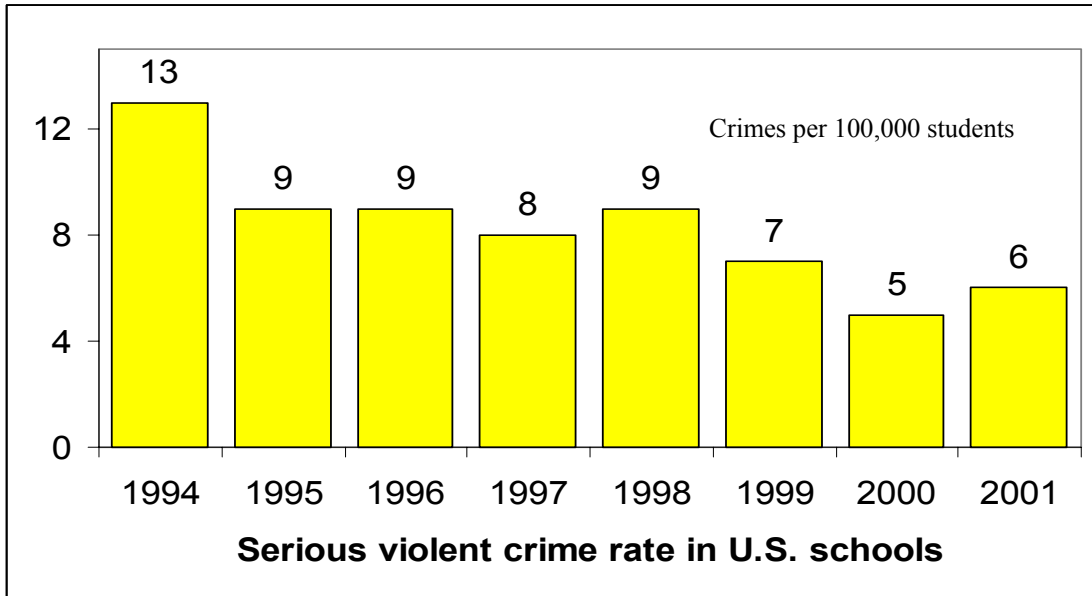
Myth 2. Juveniles are more violent than adults.

Facts: Juveniles account for just 12% of all violent crimes cleared by arrest (Snyder, 2004). The peak years for violent crime occur in young adults.



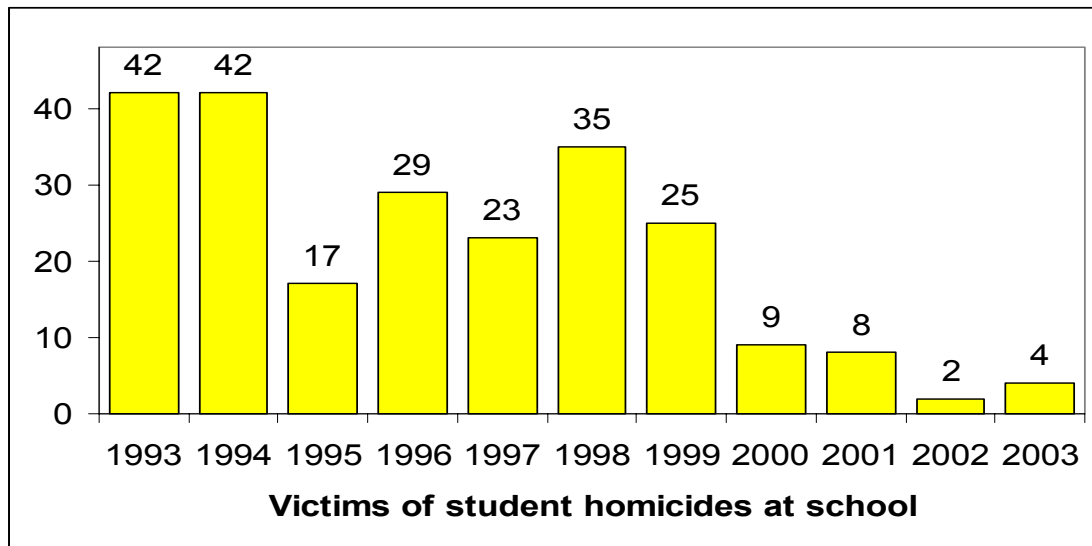
Myth 3. School violence is increasing.

Facts: The rate of violent crimes in U.S. public schools has declined since 1994 (Defoe et al., 2002). The serious violent crime rate (total number of murders, aggravated assaults, robberies, and rapes per 100,000 students) in 2001 was less than half what it was in 1994.



Myth 4. School homicides are increasing.

Facts: Media attention to several school shootings resulted in a series of copycat crimes during the late 1990's, briefly interrupting an otherwise downward trend (National School Safety Center, 2003).



Myth 5. There is a realistic possibility of a student-perpetrated homicide at your school.

News media attention to school shootings in the 1990's made them seem like frequent events, but actually homicides committed by students at school are rare events when you consider that there are more than 53 million students attending 119,000 public and private schools in the United States (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). According to the National School Safety Center (2003), there were 93 incidents in which a student murdered someone at school during the ten years from the 1992-93 school year to the 2001-02 school year. Considering that 93 incidents occurred in ten years, you can expect 9.3 incidents per year in the nation's 119,000 schools. This means that the annual probability of any one school experiencing a student-perpetrated homicide is $9.3 \div 119,000$, which is .0000781 or about 1 in 12,804. In other words, an educator can expect a student to commit a murder at his or her school once every 12,804 years.

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 serious 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. 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.

Schools are relatively safe, but they are not crime-free and we have an obligation to keep them as safe as possible. To keep schools safe, it is important to recognize what kinds of crimes are likely or unlikely to occur, and to base decisions on facts rather than fears.

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/>