

Peer Violence Among Teenagers: Trends in Violence and Threats of Violence in Schools: 1991-2010

A special Child Well-Being Index (CWI) report from Duke University, *Peer Violence Among Teenagers: Trends in Violence and Threats of Violence in Schools: 1991-2010*, tracks trends over time in percentages and numbers of middle and high school students exposed to four forms of peer-to-peer adolescent violence in schools, specifically: threat without injury; threat with a weapon without injury; intentional injury without a weapon; and injury with a weapon. These four activities represent the most extreme forms of bullying.

National data showing how cyberbullying or other kinds of teasing and tormenting among teenagers has changed over time are not now available. However, 15 years of research on the Child Well-Being Index (CWI) indicate that trends in violence tend to move together. The researchers, therefore, believe that the trends in adolescent violence found in Monitoring the Future (MTF), the annual, federally funded survey of teens which forms the basis of this report, can be used to understand general trends in bullying.

Findings

- Until 2010, more adolescents in middle and high schools were threatened than actually injured; these trends have now merged so that both threats and injuries occur at the same level.
- Trends in numbers of middle and high school students exposed to all four forms of violence began to increase in the 2002-2003 school year, peaked between 2007 and 2008, and began to decrease around 2008 and 2009.
- The annual numbers of adolescents injured intentionally without a weapon showed the greatest fluctuation. Injury without a weapon began to increase dramatically in 2003-2004, flattened out in 2008-2009, and went down slightly in 2009-2010.
- All four forms of violent bullying in schools show evidence of increases in the estimated numbers of middle and high school victims in the early 1990s – prior to the most recent peaks. It has been noted, however, that the 2002-2008 years were a period of increased access to the Internet and other forms of electronic communication and the creation and spread of social networking media.

Areas for Further Research

This report raises key questions and highlights an urgent need for further research to address current issues:

- What are the triggers that lead to an increase in adolescent violence and/or bullying? Why, for example, did we see an increase in intentional injury without a weapon from 2002 to 2008?
- How are immigration laws impacting violent behavior among teenagers in schools? Is bullying increasing in states that have intensified the search for and the detention and deportation of undocumented immigrants?
- Did the events of September 11, 2001 impact bullying and/or violent behavior in schools? Did bullying increase in areas with larger populations of families of Middle Eastern descent after the attacks?

Revising Monitoring the Future

This report also reveals a great need to improve how data are collected on adolescent violence, as the well-established Monitoring the Future (MTF) does not seem to capture many of the most significant school-related threats to teenagers.

Issues to consider when revising the survey should include:

- Does the MTF survey really capture bullying? Does it capture the taunting and verbal abuse that drives many school children to withdraw from social activities, especially school attendance, and possibly become depressed or even commit suicide?
- Has MTF kept up with social and cultural developments, such as the use of social media to torment peers?
- MTF specifies threats and injuries with or without weapons. What constitutes a weapon? When a pencil is used to repeatedly puncture someone's arm, is that a weapon? What about a school bag full of books? A rock? Are all of the weapons that school children actually use against one another captured in the data?

About the Report

Peer Violence Among Teenagers: Trends in Violence and Threats of Violence in Schools: 1991-2010 is based on data from Monitoring the Future (MTF), a national survey designed to explore trends and changes in values, behaviors and orientations of American adolescents. Every year, thousands of eighth, tenth, and twelfth graders participate in the survey and respond to questions on a series of subjects such as drug use, religious orientation, school performance, violence, and parental socio-economic status. The survey is administered by the National Institute of Drug Abuse (NIDA).

MTF provides five self-reported indicators for FCD's annual Child Well-Being Index (CWI), including twelfth grade trends in smoking cigarettes, binge drinking, use of illicit drugs, attendance in religious services, and the importance of religion to the student. The MTF data also include responses to a number of questions about the experience of various specific forms of violence and threats of violence in school-related contexts.

Peer Violence Among Teenagers: Trends in Violence and Threats of Violence in Schools: 1991-2010 uses the data from the answers to these questions to study changes in peer-to-peer adolescent violence over time and the influence of sociodemographic and behavioral characteristics on the relative likelihood of being victim of these behaviors.

The questions used from the MTF survey are:

How often have the following four things happened to you while at school (inside or outside or in a school-bus) during the previous twelve months?

1. Has an unarmed person threatened you with injury, but not actually injured you?
2. Has someone threatened you with a weapon, but not actually injured you?
3. Has someone injured you on purpose without using a weapon?
4. Has someone injured you with a weapon (like a knife, gun, or club)?

The response categories are: 1="Not At All" 2="Once" 3="Twice" 4="3 or 4 Times" 5="5 or More Times"