Perceptions of School Safety among Students in a Rural Oklahoma School
Steven R. Walker, OL T 78

Abstract
The purpose of this project was to determine if the sample of rural high school students might have concerns for their safety while attending school. I created a survey intended to measure perceptions of safety while at school. The students were asked to volunteer from JROTC and Vo-Ag providing 90 students for the sample.

Findings indicated that the students may, indeed, have some concerns about their safety while at school. Lack of a random sample and low reliability of the survey caused questions about the findings. However, it was concluded that the school might wish to follow up with another survey at a later time.

Introduction and Statement of Purpose
The school has always been the most important means of transferring the wealth of tradition from one generation to the next. This applies today in an even higher degree than former times, for through modern development of economic life, the family (Einstein, 2012).

Statement of Purpose
The purpose of this research was to measure perceived safety of school environment for the students at the rural public schools for which I work. The issue when doing this research was to help reduce chances of violence in the classroom to allow students to learn, grow, and mature while attending public schools. The project had the potential to improve several problem areas, such as poor school attendance, grades, and lackluster involvement in school activities, and reduce negative attitudes, decrease student referrals, and negative behavior, reduce fear, and with progress build school spirit. If there were high levels of perceived violence then it would be important for the school system to make needed changes. The examination of perceived school safety required research and the examination of many psychological aspects and background articles of some of our most violent as well as low-level violent crimes committed in public school systems nationwide in the United States from November 2012 to August 2013.

Setting of the Problem
Students, teachers, and support personal at rural public Schools deserve a nontoxic environment to receive an education, teach, and work in. However, many teachers across the United States have stopped teaching in public schools for fear of their own safety. Students fearing for their safety can create poor attendance and lower grades, especially for bullying victims (Berkowitz & Benbenishty, 2012; Wegner, Garcia-Santiago, Nishimura, & Hishinuma, 2010). A large majority of students are now in possession of cell phones while attending school. The issue with students in possession of cell phones at school can cause a situation that will escalate out of control. With any violent situation that makes students uncomfortable, the first thing they will do is contact their parents. Then the parents rush to the school to pick up their child. 1,200 students with cell phones can create more chaos on top of an uncomfortable situation school administrators are already dealing with, when the parents all arrive at once.

Many adults assume that school is an environment that is nurturing, that it provides opportunities to pursue knowledge and to achieve personal growth. However, students provide compelling evidence that they do not
feel safe in their school. Nearly 6% of American high school students reported they stayed home from school in the last 30 days because they felt unsafe at school or on their way to and from school. Many such students are victims of, or witnesses to, interpersonal violence, bullying and aggressive behavior, drug trafficking, or intruders prompting building lockdowns. (Jacobson, Riesch, Temkin, Kedrowski, & Kluba, 2010, p. 149)

History and Background

Looking back over the past two decades, school violence as well as the level of violence has increased at a staggering rate. The parents of rural schools generally assumed their children would experience low-levels of violence and violent crime at school (Grossman, Hinkley, Kawalski, & Margrave, 2005). The climate of the school was influenced by the condition of the neighborhood and the surrounding community. Surprisingly, studies have shown school violence in rural communities has climbed and the feeling that children are safer in rural areas may not be founded (Renfro, Huebner, Callahan, & Ritchey, 2003; Schwartz, & Gertseva, 2010).

The perception has been that urban students appeared more violent, again because of the location, which led to more street brawls, destructive acts, along with gang violence; however, rural communities are not immune (Renfro et al, 2003).

The root cause for many of the issues with school violence was thought to come from a systemic problem across the United States (Schwebel, 2012). School violence is inversely related to school achievement (Milam, Furr-Holden, & Leaf, 2010) and as if in response, many politicians wanted to come up with guidelines of “No student left behind” or they felt the need to retest and recertify America’s teachers because America’s children were not getting the education they deserved.

Although changing, it still holds true today that mostly white females are going into teaching. A quarter of teachers starting a career in teaching will leave the profession within three years and will also tend to leave urban schools sooner. One of the main reasons for leaving given by mathematics teachers was, “No Child Left Behind” (Curtis, 2012). If one examines the organizational culture of a school, teacher tenure should be a part of that examination. High teacher turnover cannot lead to higher levels of stability.

Schools may be where violence seems to centralize, but home is where the character of America’s children is shaped and molded. For many children home has not been a healthy place or a nurturing environment for a child to feel safe and secure, and then a chain reaction is set in motion. When children do not get enough attention they may begin to feel neglected and often have to fight for their own survival. Many adults understand that with adolescent children, growing into adulthood can be the most challenging period of time because the opportunity to become involved in criminal activities is heightened.

Scope of the Problem

The scope of the study was focused on unsafe school issues; from violent crimes, low-level violence, bullying, assaults, threats, vandalism, harassment, to sexual assaults. This study also included the emergency response of first responders to include police, medical, and fire department.

The research involved data provided from the Internet along with examination of past incidents at this district. The research reviewed how some incidents were handled through current policies and regulations.

Significance of the Project
This research might benefit and educate the employees and students of the seriousness of criminal acts at public schools. This research would help to explain the effects of attending and working in toxic school environment for everyone involved.

**Definition of Terms**

**Lockdown:** This is where the school has been notified by police of an incident close proximity of the school such as a robbery, escaped inmate, or other threatening events that might bring concern to the school. Then all school doors to include all classrooms are locked and students are not allowed to leave until the all clear is given by an administrator.

**Intruder:** This is where an unidentified individual is on campus. The procedure is to lock doors and turn lights off and the students are to hide from window view in the classroom. Everyone is to remain in place until the all clear from police or administrator is given.

**VO-AG:** Vocational Agriculture: a class taught at the high school level.

**JROTC:** Junior Reserve Officer Training Corp: a class taught at the high school level.

**Review of the Literature**

Many people would agree that attending some Middle and High Schools in the United States has definitely been a very dangerous place to receive a quality education or even work as an employee. Working with adolescents and seeing distressing situations, such as bullying, fights, and drug use are a part of many public schools daily routine.

**Motivation**

The location of the school plays a very important role in what type of low-level violence or violent crime a student or teacher may have to face or experience. High percentages of teachers (up to 84%) have faced victimization of some kind within one year (Espelage et al, 2013). Some teachers have quit teaching jobs for personal fear of working in an unsafe environment. This toxic environment naturally inhibits students’ right to a free, quality, and safe education (Hong & Eamon, 2011).

In 2007, an estimated 1.5 million U.S. students between the ages of 12 and 18 were victims of nonfatal crimes at school involving both theft and violence. Although this victimization rate declined between 1992 and 2007, the rate remained stable between 2004 and 2007. As might be expected, sizable proportions of students report concerns about their school safety, which researchers have frequently measured by students’ perceptions of school safety or danger. (Hong & Eamon, 2011, p. 428)

**Obstacles and Conflicts in Schools**

Students may have issues at school, because of many of the obstacles and issues they faced at home. Some issues might have been: wondering if they were going to eat when they got home, whether their parents were going to be fighting over money, or worrying whether their parents found a job. Parents do not hide or keep family issues and problems at the adult level as generations of the past have. Violence in the home also means violence in communities which then means violence in the schools (Lunenburg, 2011). Schools need to develop strict policies dealing with weapons and violent students in the schools.
If there is violence in the schools, then the teachers cannot teach optimally, nor can the students learn optimally.

Strengths of Schools
In public education there are teachers, administrators, and auxiliary personnel in charge of educating our children in America. Many of these individuals are highly educated and qualified to make an impact and teach lifelong skills to these children. Teachers come to the profession full of idealism but soon are dismayed and often leave, and they especially leave schools with low performing students (Espelage, et al, 2013; Boyd, Lankford, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2005).

More violence, means lower grades and underachievement, which then could lead to fewer highly experienced teachers.

Additionally, educators could be better trained to recognize potential problems (Espelage, et al, 2013). As Cornell (2011) pointed out, many times children about to commit a violent crime will say something to someone ahead of time. Many times friends and classmates at school are aware that something is wrong. Teachers and students need to be aware and they should speak up and do something with first awareness of problems (Cornell, 2011). According to Cornell (2011),

Many of the students had spent weeks or months contemplating, planning, and preparing to attack, and had often confided their ideas to friends or classmates. In some instances they sought assistance in obtaining a weapon or carrying out an attack, and in other cases they issued warnings to persons they did not want to harm or expressed anger toward those they wanted to kill. All of these behaviors reflected the strong developmental need of adolescents for peer acknowledgment (Cornell, 2011, p. 45).

It was as though, according to Cornell (2011), those students wanted an audience and public acknowledgment of their deeds.

Problems in Schools
Urban gangs, guns, weapons, street violence, abused and battered children, poor living conditions and sex crimes had been committed against some of these children (Algozzin & McGee, 2011).

Over 55 million prekindergarten through 12th grade, as well as 15 million college and university students are educated in the American school system each year (Algozzin & McGee, 2011). Schools today face problems with violence, as demonstrated by events such as Sandy Hook Elementary, Dunblane Primary School, Columbine, High School, and Virginia Tech University shootings. These rare but ultimately fatal events display only a small portion of violence in America’s school system. Other forms of violence within schools are property damage, acts of bullying against same-sex or opposite–sex peers, non-violent acts such as truancy that are victimless (Algozzin & McGee, 2011).

Naturally, schools are concerned with all aspects of student misbehavior and violence such as fighting, bullying, and gangs (Algozzin & McGee, 2011). Sometimes, however, the violence is incredibly severe such as with Dunblane Primary school, Columbine and Virginia Tech (Algozzin & McGee, 2011).

While rare, these serious events are part of a broader group of undesirable behaviors that result in negative outcomes and serve to
define school violence, including acts against objects and property (e.g., theft, vandalism, arson), acts against same-sex peers (e.g., intimidation, bullying, assault), acts against opposite-sex peers (e.g., harassment, assault, rape), acts against school personnel (e.g., assault, theft, sexual offenses), and other “victimless” acts (e.g., truancy, skipping classes). (Algozzin & McGee, 2011, p. 91)

Perspective

Some research has suggested that policy debates regarding school violence were needed in order to inform and involve the public on certain issues. Experts in sociology suggested students should be carefully studied in order to determine which health issues may result in rampage school shootings (Harris & Harris, 2012). Harris and Harris (2012) suggested that policy debates were needed so that the public gets involved in determining solutions for school violence.

One remedy to some of these limitations, a remedy that might lead to a more robust understanding of rampage violence and more productive policy debates, is to encourage a trans-disciplinary research approach. In her study of rampage school shootings, Newman, a sociologist, concluded that by themselves existing sociological and mental health explanations—such as the presence of mental illness, bullying, media violence, poor social support, and access to firearms—were inadequate explanations for the actions of the perpetrators she studied. (Harris & Harris, 2012, p. 1055)

Given the many problems of violence in schools as mentioned above, in this study I intended to discover if the children in a particular school were feeling frightened. In addition, I wanted to determine the personal experience that students had with possible violence at their school. The school I selected was somewhat rural and one that I would not expect any concerns for violence. I wanted to see if my hypothesis was correct or not and determine what I might suggest to the school.

Methods

Hypothesis

The null hypothesis indicated the students would be neutral or concerned with their safety while attending the district’s public schools (Ho: µs ≤ µ). The alternate hypothesis was that the students would feel safe while attending public schools in rural, Oklahoma (Ha: µs > µ).

Design

The design of the study was a needs analysis. To analyze my survey and to see whether I would either accept the null hypothesis or reject the null hypothesis, I used a formal method for testing the hypothesis and single sample t-test in order to determine if there might be a need for changes at the school.

The reader should keep in mind there were several reasons why a person might not have been able to generalize this study’s conclusion to other school districts. Responding to the survey was not mandatory and the survey was only provided once. Due to time constraints of the end of the school year, only the Vo-Ag and JROTC students were provided with the survey on a volunteer bases. Thus, the sample was not
random so the conclusions should be tentative. Every effort was made to ensure reliability and validity of the data and to avoid bias by assuming a neutral attitude in administering the survey. The survey contained items that were not related to school safety so as not to bias the results (described below). However, as seen below the internal consistency of the total scores was not good.

**Participants**

There were 90 respondents from high school students of two different classes, consisting of male and female, 9th through 12th grade and between the ages 14 and 19. The sample size was from a possible 1200 students who attended the high school. The survey was given on May 21, 2013 and May 22, 2013.

**Instrumentation**

The survey was administered to the students by school officials to measure two different variables. In an attempt to avoid bias, I used thirty questions covering several topics to elude the students from the main topic of concern which was safety at school. Twenty questions were used to cover my topic of concern. An example of a question is, “Do you have any concerns when it comes to your safety while attending school?” The lower the scores the greater was the concern for safety while higher scores were meant to show low concern for safety. I expected that the students would score high and not be concerned about safety at this school. There were 20 questions and 5 points per question. The full survey may be found in the Appendix.

**Procedure**

The surveys were given on a volunteer bases to all the students in Vo-AG and JROTC. The results were put in a sealed box under strict confidentiality. At the end of school day I open the box and numbered each survey, and then I entered all the data in STATISTICA so that I could further analyze the data. To test my hypothesis I used the single sample t-test. Tables and graphs were created to visualize the data.

**Summary of Results**

**Descriptive Data Analysis**

I had an opportunity to analyze responses from the high school students to see if they were concerned with their safety while attending public school. As seen below in Table 1 the mean was 64.61 and standard deviation of the sample was 11.68.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Valid N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Minimum</th>
<th>Maximum</th>
<th>Std.Dev.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total Concern Score</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>64.61</td>
<td>30.0000</td>
<td>97.0000</td>
<td>11.6527</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The surveys the students were administered should help show if the students had any concerns with their safety. An explanation of the data is needed to better understand Figure 1. As seen below, the highest score any student could have received on the survey was 119 points and the lowest score possible was 19 points, this would be a 100 point spread. However lower scores meant students were more concerned with school violence and higher scores meant students were not as concerned. If the students were not concerned in the main with their well-being at school, they should have scored significantly above a 71, or a little over the “C” level out of the possible 100 points. Figure 1 shows a histogram of the total scores.
Next I did a Cronbach’s reliability for raw scores (internal consistency) which turned out to be .267. This was a low reliability so I felt I could not trust that my total score was correct or meaningful. The issue was whether or not the children frightened of attending public schools and if I could trust the total score I would say the children were somewhat frightened and concerned with their safety. However, I had to be very tentative due to such low reliability.

One can trust data more if the correlation is high. With a reliability score of .267 I believe that the total scores were suspect because I thought the students would consistently score above a 71 and they scored on the average about 65, which is a low point score indicating high concern for safety and it was hard to believe that I could be so wrong about my guess, knowing the students as I did. Therefore I could have been incorrect in my thought, or the lack of consistency in scoring may have indicated students not answering truthfully or not taking the survey seriously. However, I could not know this for certain and with such a large spread, it could be that some of the students were truly concerned.

With the exploratory figures below I will thus raise some questions of safety for the students. It is possible that many of these students have not ever experienced any life threatening situations and simply did not know how to respond. These data may be true and showing the ignorance of the students in that they could have failed to recognize the significant danger they could possibly be facing by not reporting dangerous school violations.

**Inferential Data Analysis**

The null hypothesis was that the students would have some concern about violence while attending public schools in rural Oklahoma (Ho: $\mu_s \leq \mu$). I did not believe that the students would have concerns so the alternate (actual) hypothesis was in the opposite direction as the null (Ha: $\mu_s > \mu$). In other words, I believed these rural children would feel safe and score high. The critical value of t with 89 degrees of freedom was 1.697. (I used 30 df as my table did not go to 89). The mean of the group was 64.61, as seen in Table 1 and in Figure 1 Total Concern Score. The standard error was 1.23 (11.79/ the square root of 90), and the actual t score was -5.19. I did not reject my null hypothesis. I had to conclude that the students may not be feeling safe as I believed. If one could trust the total scores the difference between the actual mean and the mu would lead one to believe that the students actually may have had concerns while attending public school in rural Oklahoma. This surprised me but then one should not trust the total score.

**Exploratory Statistical Analyses**

Because my data had a low score on the Cronbach reliability, I was inspired to further explore the data from my survey and
analyze the data using exploratory techniques from STATISTICA. I conducted a feature selection which is a predictive analytic technique for determining what variables might predict others. The input and analysis had some very interesting possible outcomes as seen in the graphs below.

Figure 2 shows the importance plot from the feature selection in which I predicted gender from the 20 questions that were variables of the total score. The graph shows the relative importance in predicting gender and the longer the bar in the graph, the more important the variable in predicting gender.

**Figure 2.** To predict gender from all the other questions this is my importance plot.

This plot (Figure 3) shows the top three predictors of gender and how they might have been predicting (in which direction for example). I used ANOVA to generate the plot. In other words these three variables, “school safe rating,” “secure classrooms locked,” and “teachers sensitive to racial issues” were answered differently by the female and male students. These were the three questions that most separated the males and females as Figure 3 demonstrates.

**Figure 3.** Although the differences were not significant (based on the overlapping 95% confidence interval and the fact that p = .147), the males might have felt more secure in the classrooms than the females in having the doors locked and males may have felt safer in school than the females.

The breakdown of males versus females may be seen in Figure 4 and Figures 5 through 6 show where there might have been some areas of concern.

**Figure 4.** This pie chart for figure 4 has the breakdown with 69% male and 31% female who took the survey.
Figure 5. Indicates that 76% of the children indicated they had seen classmates with a weapon.

Figure 6. Close to 12% of the students said that they have seen a classmate with a gun at school.

Figure 7. Indicates that 58% of the students feel threatened and by whom.

Discussion and Conclusions

Strengths and Weaknesses

The overall Cronbach reliability may have shown the survey results had a low score, meaning I may not want to trust my data. However, if believed, the survey showed the students had a low average score which exhibited the students may have had a number of concerns when safety was an issue. Data were analyzed by gender, grade and age and it appeared students may have been concerned overall. Observation of the top three questions that separated males from females in the survey may also bring some concerns to focus on, such as how safe the students rated the school, having classrooms locked, and teachers being sensitive to racial issues.

To think that perhaps 12% of the students had seen another student in the school with a gun was potentially alarming, though it was not known if the students were actually telling the truth or trying to startle the adults. The potential finding should not be ignored, however.

Recommendations

The data may show some concern when it comes to a student in possession of a weapon while at school. Were the students being honest in answering this question? Perhaps the school should conduct some internal investigations within the school system to determine the accuracy of the findings. I find it difficult to believe the findings given the low reliability. There are considerations as to why the reliability was so low. Perhaps the questions were emotion-laden which meant individuals answered erratically. Perhaps they did not take the survey seriously. Maybe the students were trying to frighten the adults as
a mischievous thing to do. However, it might be prudent for the school to follow up with another survey and to continue to be alert to any signs of potential violence. Encouraging open communication would be very important for any administration.

**Suggestions for Future research**

As a result of my study I have found out that this school has investigation ongoing constantly with students. I am hoping (and thinking) this study’s outcome was an isolated finding and I am sure all are working in this district have their eyes open. However, it is my recommendation that future studies be conducted as a precaution.

**References**


Retrieved December, 2012 from http://dx.doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2011.300545


# Appendix – The Survey

Dear Student:
At our school, we value your feedback. Please fill out the survey, your feedback is completely anonymous. We appreciate your participation!

## AREA OF SERVICE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>OVERALL IMPRESSION</th>
<th>QUALITY RATING</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How old are you?</td>
<td>14  15  16  17  18 or older</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender?</td>
<td>Male or Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What grade are you in?</td>
<td>9th  10th  11th  12th</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How many years have you attended the district schools?</td>
<td>1  2  3  4  5  6 or more</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you feel more secure having classrooms locked during instructional periods?</td>
<td>Yes or No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do feel more of a threat from?</td>
<td>Classmates, intruder no threats</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Would you have any concerns with a teacher carrying a weapon at school who is trained and certified?</td>
<td>Yes or No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you have any concerns when it comes to your safety while attending school?</td>
<td>Yes or No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One being the lowest, rate how safe you feel at school.</td>
<td>1  2  3  4  5  6  7  8  9  10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is there any particular building in school which brings more concern for your safety?</td>
<td>Yes or No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List____________________________________</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## SCHOOL RESOURCES OFFICER (SRO)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SCHOOL RESOURCES OFFICER (SRO)</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Do you feel the SRO is visible enough throughout the day?</td>
<td>Yes or No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What area of school do you feel the SRO needs to be more available?</td>
<td>List___________________</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## SAFETY PROCEDURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SAFETY PROCEDURES</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Do you feel the school has adequate safety procedures in place to protect you from an intruder?</td>
<td>Yes or No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are you aware of the anonymous tip line?</td>
<td>SAFE-CALL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you know what to do in case of an emergency?</td>
<td>Yes or No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## BEHAVIOR

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>BEHAVIOR</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students in our school show respect for each other.</td>
<td>Yes or No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Our school’s discipline policies are fair and effective.</td>
<td>Yes or No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students in our school demonstrate sensitivity to racial and ethnic issues.</td>
<td>Yes or No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers and administrators at our school demonstrate sensitivity to racial and ethnic issues.</td>
<td>Yes or No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have you ever seen a classmate with a weapon? (circle)</td>
<td>Yes or No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knife or Gun</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AREA OF SERVICE</th>
<th>QUALITY RATING</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Based on your experience, do you believe there is a problem at school?</td>
<td>Yes or No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List ______________________</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>PARENT-SCHOOL COMMUNICATION</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents feel welcome in our schools.</td>
<td>Yes or No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The views of parents are seriously considered when school decisions are made.</td>
<td>Yes or No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents have a good understanding of the school’s programs and operations.</td>
<td>Yes or No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents receive information they need about the school’s programs.</td>
<td>Yes or No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>MORE COMMENTS?</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Please expand upon your assessment of any areas in which our school could</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>improve.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Optional comments</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[Comments]</td>
<td></td>
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