

The Nature of School Violence in North Carolina and Perceptions of School Violence Among School Officials

Although extremely rare (between 2009-2013, there was only one mass shooting at a primary or secondary school in the U.S.), the recent tragic, widely-publicized mass shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary has brought active shooter situations to the forefront of the school security discussion. School violence in the United States is not a new phenomenon; one of the first reported acts of school violence was Pontiac's Rebellion school massacre in 1764, where the school master and 9 to 10 school children were killed (K2Academics, 2013). However, all acts of violence regardless of severity occur too frequently for comfort and create a difficult and hostile learning environment.

North Carolina is not immune to threats of violence at school. For example, in 2006, a student opened fire outside of a high school in Hillsborough, injuring two students (WRAL News, 2006). In 2011, a student was shot and critically injured at a Fayetteville high school (WRAL News, 2011). More recently there has been a rash of students possessing firearms or weapons at school. In January of 2013, high school students in Kernersville, Raleigh and Winston-Salem were arrested and charged with possession of a weapon on school property after being found to have a firearm. In the Kernersville event, a separate juvenile was also arrested for being in possession of a knife (WXII News, 2013). Statistically speaking however, these acts occur much less frequently than other crimes on school grounds, but tend to attract much more attention from the media and parents. In particular, the media has been shown to publicize these events so extensively because this type of coverage gives people an overly distorted idea of their chances of being victimized (Lawrence & Mueller, 2003).

While the preceding acts may gain much more media attention and may incite fear, the majority of violent



acts are affray (fighting) and not murder, rape, sexual assault, robbery, or aggravated assault. This is not to say that serious violent acts do not occur, only that they occur much less frequently than affray or simple assault. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) and Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) report that in the 2009-2010 school year, 74 percent of public schools in the United States reported at least one violent incident with 359,000 victims of violent acts (Robers, Simon, Zhang, Truman & Snyder, 2012). Regardless, property crimes at school, such as theft, occur at a higher rate than all violent acts combined (470,000 thefts compared to 329,000 violent acts). Similarly, country-wide, homicides of school-aged children at school (which includes travel to and from school and school events) were extremely rare (17, or 2% of all youth homicides ages 5-18).

It is important to note that there is no framework that can accurately identify all individuals capable or willing to commit acts of violence at our nation's schools. No one policy or mechanism is enough to prevent or otherwise deter a violent act. A position statement endorsed by nearly 170 organizations and 240 individual researchers and practitioners believes four things must happen to truly make schools safer and prevent violence: balance, communication,

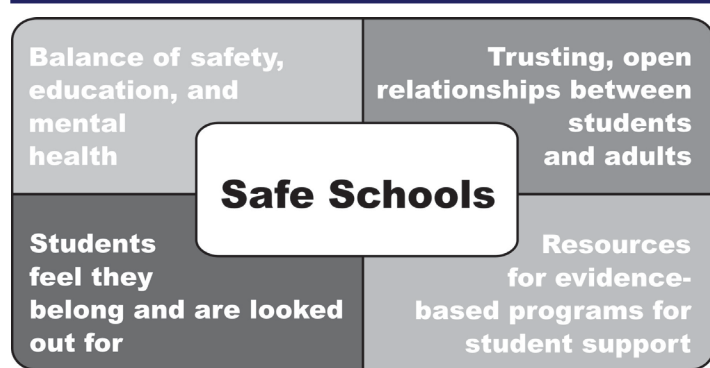
connectedness and support (Avi Astor, 2012). First, any approach to violence prevention should balance methods to ensure physical safety, a good education and the mental health of students (including social, behavioral and emotional needs). Second, school personnel need to establish trust and open relationships with students and community members so all parties feel comfortable reporting potential threats. Third, students should feel like they belong at school, in the community and that people will look out for them. Fourth, schools must have the resources to implement evidence-based programs to effectively support students and their families. This concept is illustrated in Figure 1.

The Department of Public Instruction's Consolidated Crime Report

State law (GS 115C-12(21)) in North Carolina requires Local Educational Agencies (LEAs), or school districts, to report the incidence of 16 criminal acts that occur on school property to the State Board of Education. These crimes include: homicide, assault resulting in serious bodily injury, assault involving the use of a weapon, rape, sexual offense, sexual assault, kidnapping, robbery with a dangerous weapon, taking indecent liberties with a minor, assault on school personnel, bomb threat, burning of a school building, possession of alcoholic beverage, possession of controlled substance in violation of law, possession of a firearm or powerful explosive and possession of a weapon¹. In the 2011-2012 school year, North Carolina schools reported 11,161 criminal acts (7.63 acts per 1,000 enrolled) that fall in to one of these categories, a decrease in count and rate from the 2009-2010 (11,608 incidents or 7.97 acts per 1,000 enrolled) and 2010-2011 (11,657 incidents or 8.03 acts per 1,000 enrolled) school years. This information was reported to and by school officials and does not include acts that were not discovered or

¹ A weapon is defined as: “(1) any BB gun, (2) stun gun, (3) air rifle, (4) air pistol, (5) bowie knife, (6) dirk, (7) dagger, (8) slingshot, (9) leaded cane, (10) switchblade knife, (11) blackjack, (12) metallic knuckles, (13) razors and razor blades, (14) fireworks, or (15) any sharp-pointed or edged instrument, except instructional supplies, unaltered nail files, clips, and tools used solely for preparation of food, instruction, maintenance” (N.C. Department of Public Instruction, 2011).

Figure 1. Ensuring School Safety Through a Comprehensive Framework



From (Avi Astor et al., 2012)

reported to school officials. The relative rates of these actions are shown in Figure 2 on the facing page.

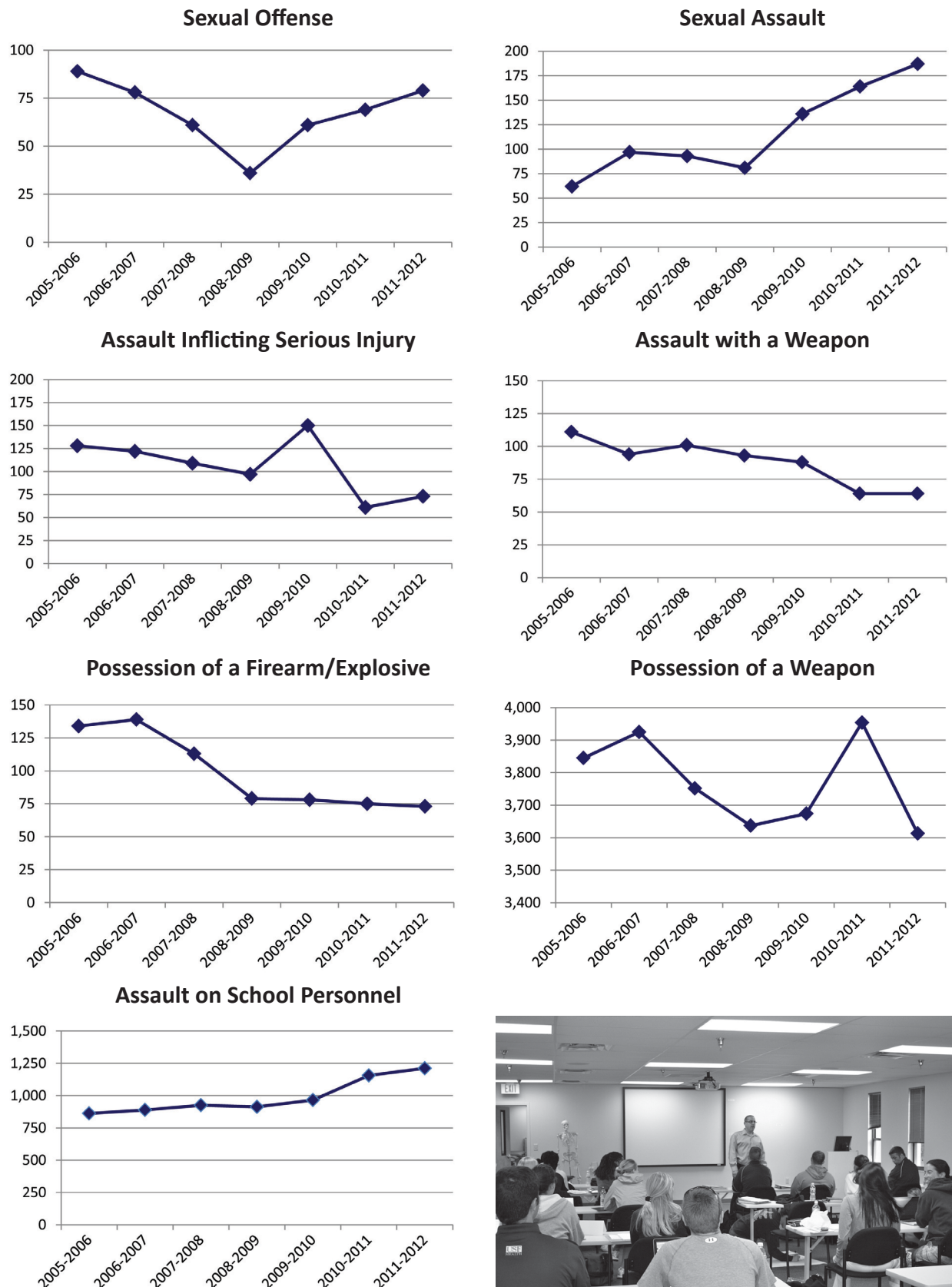
The Response of North Carolina youth to the Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS)

In addition to official numbers, the Center for Disease Control (CDC) through the High School Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS), collects data on self-reported behaviors of juveniles involving school violence both as a perpetrator and victim. The YRBS is a nationally representative survey that collects data biannually. The most recent survey conducted in 2011 included 2,250 school-aged juveniles from North Carolina (15,000 in the U.S.) and found:

1. 6.1 percent (137 of 2,232) reported carrying a weapon (e.g., gun, knife, or club) on school property at least one day in the 30 days before the survey was administered.
2. 9.1 percent (207 of 2,272) reported being threatened or injured with a weapon on school property at least once in the 12 months preceding survey administration.
3. 10.6 percent (237 of 2,232) reported being in a physical altercation on school property at least once in the 12 months preceding survey administration.
4. 20.5 percent (460 of 2,241) reported being bullied on school property at some point in the 12 months before the survey was administered.
5. 6.8 percent (154 of 2,250) reported missing one day in the 30 days before taking part in the survey because they felt unsafe, either at school or in transit to or from school.

**The Nature of School Violence in North Carolina
and the Perception of School Violence Among School Officials**

Figure 2: Offenses Reported to the N.C. Department of Public Instruction



The Nature of School Violence in North Carolina and the Perception of School Violence Among School Officials



Table 1 below presents the results of the school violence section of the Youth Risk Behavior Survey for the past three surveys (2007, 2009 and 2011) broken down by U.S. versus North Carolina. Reported weapon carrying has decreased from 2007 in both the United States and North Carolina; however, in both 2007 and 2011, a higher percentage of North Carolina youth reported carrying a weapon compared to country-wide. In addition, the percentage of students who have been threatened/injured with a weapon and bullied has increased each of the years.

These numbers grow exponentially when you consider perpetration and victimization off of school property. For example, when not on school property, one in five juveniles reported carrying a weapon in the last 30 days, more than one in four reported being in one or more fights in the year preceding the survey, the percent who have been electronically bullied from school was 15.7 percent and the percent of juveniles indicating they were victims of physical abuse resulting in injury by a boyfriend or girlfriend was 14.1 percent (CDC, 2011).

N.C. Criminal Justice Analysis Center Survey of School Officials' Perceptions of Violence

In March and April of 2013, the Criminal Justice Analysis Center (CJAC) at the North Carolina Governor's Crime Commission (NC GCC) sent online surveys to six types of school officials with potential knowledge of school violence. A listing of all the email addresses of principals was obtained from the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NC DPI) website and the survey invitation was sent to them. The survey invitation was also sent to social workers, school psychologists, school nurses and school counselors directly to their listservs with the assistance of staff from DPI. With the assistance of the North Carolina School Resource Officer Association (NC SROA), survey invitations were sent to around 300 school resource officers (SROs). An additional directory of SROs was created by the CJAC by viewing the pages of sheriff's departments, police departments and schools in North Carolina counties to find mention of SROs and their contact information. The survey invitation was emailed to all SROs from this directory as well. Additionally, SROs who had received training from the Justice Academy from 2009-2013 were included. In all, the CJAC surveyed 3,014 individuals with potential knowledge of school violence. This included 298 SROs, 616 principals, 999 school counselors, 712 school nurses, 257 school social workers and 132 school psychologists that work with a variety of age groups. Table 2 on the following page summarizes the response rate for each of these groups.

Overwhelmingly, school officials believe school violence is a slight or moderate problem at their

**Table 1: Comparison of percentages for Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS):
United States and North Carolina**

	2007		2009		2011	
	U.S.	N.C.	U.S.	N.C.	U.S.	N.C.
Carrying weapon (e.g., gun, knife, club)	5.9%	6.8%	5.6%	4.7%	5.4%	6.1%
Threatened or injured with weapon	7.8%	6.6%	7.7%	6.8%	7.4%	9.1%
Physical altercation	12.4%	10.4%	11.1%	9.4%	12.0%	10.6%
Bullied	-	-	19.9%	16.6%	20.1%	20.5%
Missed school	5.5%	7.0%	5.0%	5.6%	5.9%	6.8%

Note: The bold number indicates the larger percentage for each year.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). 2011.

**The Nature of School Violence in North Carolina
and the Perception of School Violence Among School Officials**

Table 2. Response Rates for Survey Respondent Groups.

School Official	Total Number in North Carolina	Number of Respondents in the Survey	Response Rate
Principal	2,735	616	22.5%
School Nurse	1,201	712	59.2%
School Psychologist	738	132	18.0%
Social Worker	924	257	27.8%
School Counselor	4,130	999	24.0%
School Resource Officer	<i>Unknown, the last census in 2009 reported 849</i>	298	<i>Unknown</i>

schools, gangs are not or only a slight threat to school safety and interpersonal violence and bullying is a slight or moderate threat to school safety. Importantly, in most cases, a majority of school personnel surveyed indicated they believe that the threat from gangs, interpersonal violence and bullying will increase. The results indicate that currently, most school officials do not foresee a reduction in the threat from gangs, interpersonal violence and bullying in the future. Thus, school districts and the state must take action to minimize the future threat of gangs, interpersonal violence and bullying.

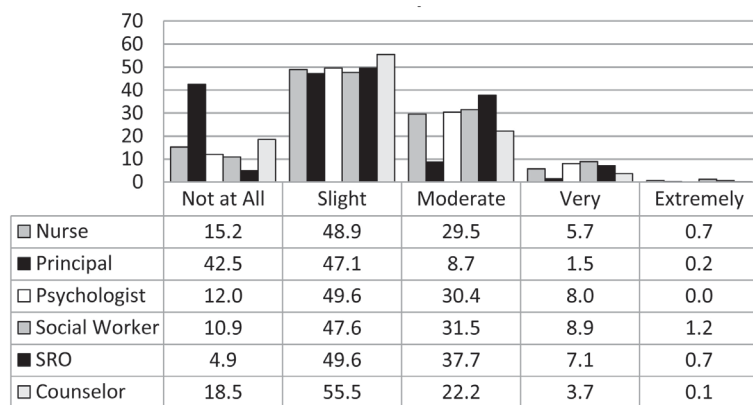
Combating School Violence

Over the last decade, schools have increasingly taken steps to ensure a safe and effective learning atmosphere. The Indicators of School Crime and Safety: 2011 (2012) reports that nationally 99 percent of schools require visitor check-in, 93 percent have blocked social networking websites from being accessed on school computers, 92 percent control access to buildings (i.e., lock doors), 91 percent have forbidden cell phone use during school hours, 63 percent have electronic emergency notifications, 61 percent have video surveillance, 46 percent restrict access to school grounds, 36 percent have anonymous tip lines, 5.2 percent use metal detectors randomly and 1.4 percent use metal detectors daily.

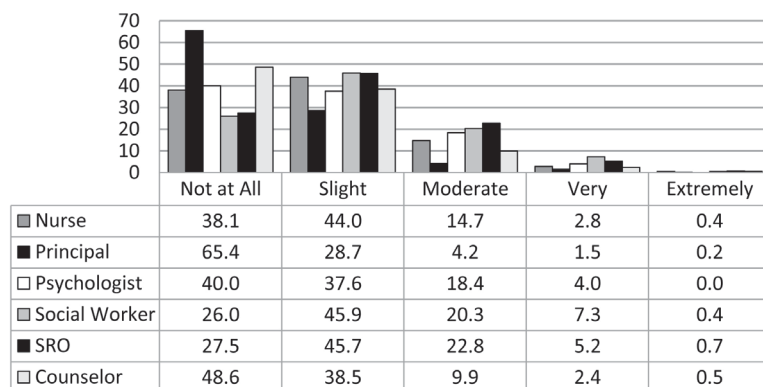


Responses to Survey of School Officials' Perceptions of School Violence, by School Official Grouping

Graph 1: To what extent do you think violence is a problem in your school?



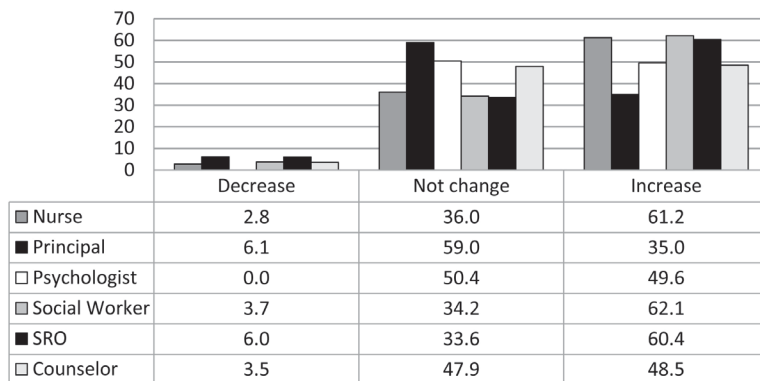
Graph 2: Currently, to what extent do you believe gangs are a threat to safety at your school during school hours?



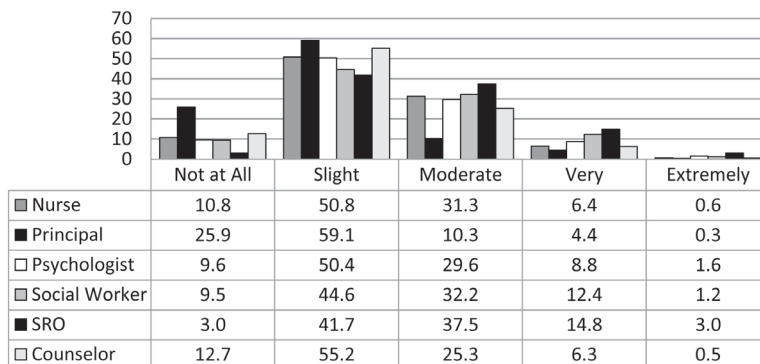
The Nature of School Violence in North Carolina and the Perception of School Violence Among School Officials

Responses to Survey of School Officials' Perceptions of School Violence, by School Official Grouping (continued)

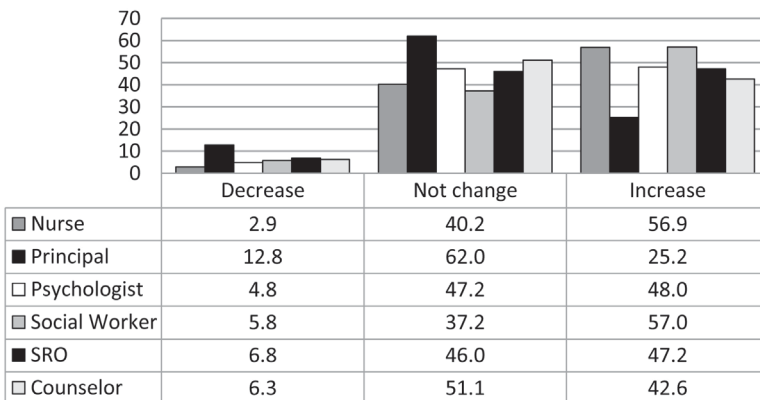
Graph 3: In the future, do you believe the threat from gangs to school safety will: decrease, not change, increase?



Graph 4: Currently, to what extent do you believe interpersonal violence (i.e. fights) is a threat to safety at your school during school hours.



Graph 5: In the future, do you believe the threat from interpersonal violence to school safety will: decrease, not change, or increase?



A recent survey by the North Carolina School Boards Association (2013) found only half of North Carolina schools districts have metal detectors, of which, only eight have them in all schools. Forty-nine per cent of school districts report having visitor buzz-in systems in some fashion. Slightly more than a third of those districts have buzz-in systems in place in over half of their schools. Almost all school districts in North Carolina report conducting constant video surveillance to some degree with over half of districts reporting that 50 percent or more of their schools have constant video surveillance. Finally, more than three quarters of high schools (82.7%) and middle schools (74.7%) have SROs. Significantly fewer elementary schools have SROs. An SRO is typically a state certified law enforcement officer whose job it is to protect schools.

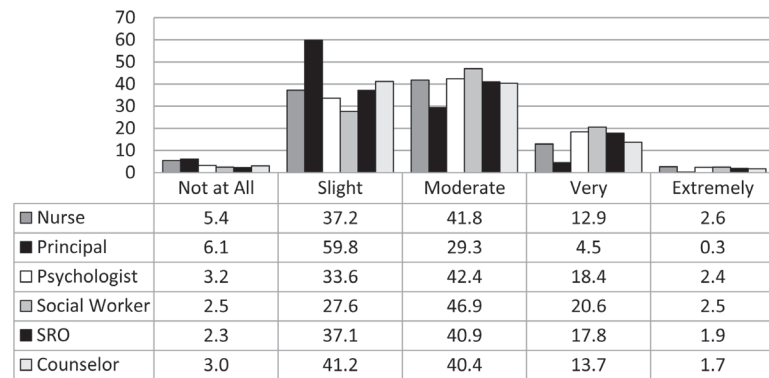
There are many programs, policies and changes that could be implemented to make schools safer. These include, but are not limited to: anti-bullying campaigns, conflict resolution classes, increased access to mental health services, increased supervision, increased security and changes in environmental design. However, coupled with decreased budget and growing expenses, school systems are finding it hard to fund the more expensive initiatives. Both the Office of Justice Programs (through crimesolutions.gov) and the Institute for Education Sciences (through the What Works Clearinghouse) list evidence-based, best practice programs or interventions that address bullying, anti-social behavior and juvenile violence. Table 3, right, lists four of the less expensive, evidence-based (3+ studies showing evidence of success) options for school-based interventions.

The Nature of School Violence in North Carolina and the Perception of School Violence Among School Officials

One of the first lines of defense when it comes to school safety is campus security and design. One way to make schools safer is crime prevention through environmental design (CPTED), as suggested by the National Clearinghouse for Educational Facilities (NCEF). CPTED (Schneider, 2010) suggests that schools address and increase natural surveillance, access control and territories. Natural surveillance refers to designing or redesigning schools or areas within schools to ensure ease of visual supervision of students. This can range from removing posters from windows to installing high-tech security cameras. Access control deals primarily with controlling who enters schools grounds and buildings. This includes, among other means of access control, requiring sign-in, locking buildings during school hours, requiring keycard access to enter buildings and configuring the school so all visitors must enter through the office. Finally, establishing the school as a territory is important in preventing trespassers. This could be as simple as posting school hours and no trespassing signs to a low fence around the schools

Responses to Survey of School Officials' Perceptions of School Violence, by School Official Grouping (continued)

Graph 6: Currently, to what extent do you think bullying is a threat to safety at your school during school hours?



Graph 7: In the future, do you believe the threat from bullying to school safety will: decrease, not change, or increase?

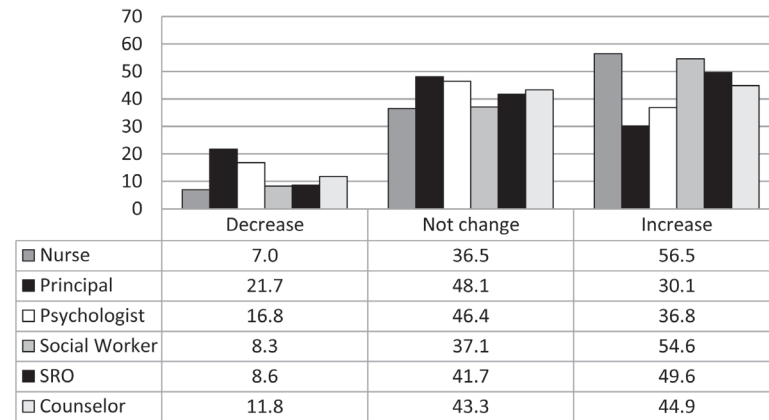


Table 3: Evidence-based, Best Practice Programs That Could Potentially Reduce Acts of School Violence.

Program Name	Program Description	Cost	Length of Intervention
First Step to Success	An intervention plan that attempts to reduce anti-social behaviors and increase the use of adaptive behaviors in kindergarteners.	\$203 for initial 3 kits (\$35 for each additional kit purchased)	3 months
Positive Action	An intervention program that works to increase positive behavior by linking positive behaviors to increased positive thoughts about oneself.	Approximately \$7,750 for a school of 500 youth	Varies
Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies (PATHS)	An intervention that attempts to increase "emotional and social competencies" and decrease aggression in elementary school students.	~\$3,000 for counselor kit for grades Pre-K thru 6	36-52 lessons
Steps to Respect	A program designed to increase school safety through intervention addressing bullying and school environment in students grades 3 through 6.	\$859 for school-wide implementation for three grades (\$259 for each additional grade)	12-14 weeks

U.S. Department of Justice, 2012. *Crimesolutions.gov*

**The Nature of School Violence in North Carolina
and the Perception of School Violence Among School Officials**

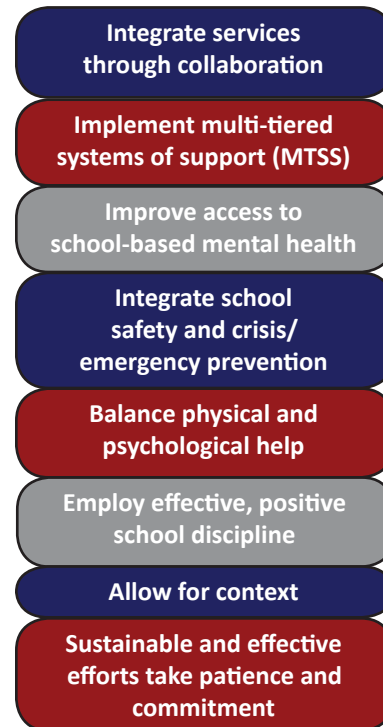
to show school boundaries. The basic tenants of decision-making apply: if there is a higher chance of being caught in a delinquent act (i.e., fighting, skipping, or drug use), there is less of a change the student commits the act in the first place.

The North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (2008) classifies responses to threats in one of the following ways: threat exclusion (barriers), situation observation (knowledge), intervention before the act (proactive) and response after the act (reactive). Ideally, all school administrators would want to address bullying, fights, violence, drug use and truancy before it happens; however, in most cases administrators are not privy to information that allows intervention before an act. This leaves them to create barriers to prevent delinquent acts and to respond appropriately when a delinquent act is observed or reported. Obviously, re-designing schools and new construction is very costly. With this in mind, the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (2008) suggests “the most basic of all safeguards ... LOCK IT AND WATCH IT.” This involves the extremely cheap, yet effective method of locking doors and limiting access to both buildings and the campus as a whole and increasing means of supervision.

In addition, a number of organizations, including the American School Counselor Association, National Association of School Psychologists, School Social Work Association of America, National Association of School Resource Officers, National Association of Elementary School Principals and National Association of Secondary School Principals, summarize much of the literature on school violence prevention in their suggestions of best practices to ensure safe and successful schools (Cowan et al., 2013). Their eight best practices suggestions are listed in Figure 3. Ultimately, they find it imperative that schools address both physical and psychological issues pertaining to school safety. In doing this, both student psychological issues and the psychological effects of safety practices and policies (i.e., SRO and metal detector use and zero-tolerance policies) must be examined.

Finally, North Carolina Governor Pat McCrory created the North Carolina Center for Safer Schools on March 19, 2013. While specifics have not been released, the center will focus on building

Figure 3: Merging of Best Practices to Create Safer Schools (Avi Astor et al., 2012)



a collaborative relationship among a variety of stakeholders and examining best practices in school safety nationwide in order to increase school safety in North Carolina. Based on its findings, the Center for Safer Schools will have the capacity to make policy and legislative recommendations. Additionally, North Carolina House Bill 452 requires that school districts meet state mandated safety requirements.

Although more frightening, data and statistics indicate the biggest threat(s) to school safety and the school environment is not an active shooter situation, but are bullying, fighting, assaults and weapon carrying. There is no framework that can precisely identify youth susceptible to committing acts of violence; however, the underlying causes of the violent behaviors listed above are addressable through prevention and intervention programs and additional target-hardening measures. North Carolina has taken a proactive and collaborative approach to addressing school violence through the creation of the Center for Safer Schools. The collaborative nature of the Center for Safer Schools is imperative to ensure evidence-based practices are introduced and implemented. There is no doubt that the children of

**The Nature of School Violence in North Carolina
and the Perception of School Violence Among School Officials**

North Carolina should thrive in schools that are free of distractions and threats of violence, but measures to combat violence must be balanced with their actual versus perceived need and their effect on the school and learning environment.

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**The Nature of School Violence in North Carolina
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Any questions or concerns should be addressed to Karen G. Jayson, Social/Clinical Research Analyst at the e-mail address above, or call her at (919) 899-9157.

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