Crime in American public schools
JACKSON TOBY

In the early 1970's Senator Birch Bayh's Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency heard alarming reports of violence and vandalism in American public schools—not just occasionally or in the central cities but chronically and all over the United States. Partly in response to these hearings, partly because of increasing preoccupation with school crime by newspapers, magazines, and television, the 93rd Congress passed an amendment to an education bill in 1974 requiring the Secretary of the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare to conduct a survey to determine the extent and seriousness of school crime.

The study was an elaborate one. Principals in 4,014 schools in large cities, smaller cities, suburban areas, and rural areas filled out questionnaires and returned them to Washington. Then 31,373 students and 23,895 teachers in 642 junior and senior high schools throughout the country were questioned about their experiences with school crime—in particular whether they themselves were victimized and, if so, how. From among the 31,373 students who filled out anonymous questionnaires, 6,283 were selected randomly for individual interviews on the same subject. Discrepancies between questionnaire reports of victimization and interview reports of victimization were probed to find out exactly what respondents meant.
when they answered that they had been attacked, robbed, or had property stolen from their desks or lockers. Finally, intensive field studies were conducted in 10 schools, schools that had had especially serious crime problems in the past and had made some progress in overcoming them.

In January 1978, the 350-page report to Congress, Violent Schools—Safe Schools, was published by the National Institute of Education. Though a scientific report, inevitably it had political overtones. Public schools with reputations for crime and violence tended to be located in the inner cities and to enroll high proportions of minority students from low-income families; average reading and mathematical levels were usually one or more grades behind national norms. Was there a causal relationship among high crime rates, low academic achievement, and a high proportion of minority students? Were parents with middle-class values enrolling their children in private or parochial schools out of fear of crime as well as out of desire for better academic instruction for their children? And, if so, did the problem of school crime explain an appreciable amount of middle-class flight from inner-city schools?

Perhaps because of the sensitivity of these issues, the report handled the data cautiously, drawing attention to some differences in the incidence of school crime and skipping lightly over others. The report showed that the crime problem was worse in junior high schools than in senior high schools, but it required careful examination of a table in an appendix to find statistics demonstrating that students in urban schools were robbed and assaulted more frequently than students in suburban or rural schools. (These statistics are reproduced in Tables I and II, below and on the next page, respectively.) But the differences are not as great as some of us might have expected. Statistics on the victimization of teachers, presented in Table III on page 22, were reported in an early chapter and showed unequivocally that urban teachers were more likely to be victimized than suburban or rural teachers—especially teachers in

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Urban Schools</th>
<th>Suburban Schools</th>
<th>Rural Schools</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Junior High Schools</td>
<td>9.5%</td>
<td>7.5%</td>
<td>7.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior High Schools</td>
<td>3.9%</td>
<td>2.4%</td>
<td>3.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table II. Percent of Students Who Reported Being Assaulted within the Past Month*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Urban Schools</th>
<th>Suburban Schools</th>
<th>Rural Schools</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Junior High Schools</td>
<td>8.2%</td>
<td>7.2%</td>
<td>6.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior High Schools</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


the largest cities. But the report tells us more than that, and we will present its findings in the form of answers to key questions on school crime.

Answered and unanswered questions

1. How much real crime is there in the schools? Does it consist mostly of juvenile mischief given the alarming labels, “crime” and “violence,” by exaggerated newspaper accounts, or is school crime mostly acts that adult perpetrators would be arrested and prosecuted for?

Schools are plagued with real crime, according to the study. Violent Schools—Safe Schools was not mainly concerned with mischief or with foul language—although it mentioned in passing that a majority of American junior-high-school teachers were sworn at by their students or were the target of obscene gestures within the month preceding the survey. The report was concerned mainly with illegal acts and with the fear those acts aroused, not with language or gestures. Both on the questionnaires and in personal interviews, students were asked questions designed to provide an estimate of the amount of theft and violence in public secondary schools:

In [the previous month] did anyone steal things of yours from your desk, locker, or other place at school?

Did anyone take money or things directly from you by force, weapons, or threats at school in [the previous month]?

At school in [the previous month] did anyone physically attack and hurt you?

Eleven percent of secondary-school students reported in personal interviews having something worth more than a dollar stolen from them in the past month. A fifth of these thefts involved property worth $10 or more. One-half of one percent of secondary-school students reported being robbed in a month’s time—that is, having property taken from them by force, weapons, or threats. One out of nine of these robberies resulted in physical injuries to the victims.
Students also told of being assaulted. One-and-a-third percent of secondary-school students reported being attacked over the course of a month, and two-fifths of these were physically injured. (However, only 14 percent of the assaults resulted in injuries serious enough to require medical attention.)

These percentages probably underestimated the true volume of student victimization. They were based on face-to-face interviews with students. The same questions asked of samples of students by means of anonymous questionnaires produced estimates of victimization about twice as high overall, and in the case of robbery four times as high. (Tables I and II are based on student questionnaires rather than on interviews.) Methodological studies conducted by the school-crime researchers convinced them that the interview results were more valid than the questionnaire results for estimating the extent of victimization; some students might have had difficulty reading and understanding the questionnaire. On the other hand, fear of crime kept some students from attending school. In reply to the question, “Did you stay at home any time in [the previous month] because someone might hurt you or bother you at school?” 8 percent of the students in big-city junior high schools said “yes,” as compared with 4 percent in rural junior high schools and 5 percent in suburban and smaller-city junior high schools. Since the students who had an opportunity to reply to this question were those attending school on the day the questionnaire was administered (or on a subsequent make-up session), students in the sample who failed to fill out their questionnaires may have contained a higher proportion of victims of school crime and a higher percentage of those frightened into truancy.

The report also contained data on the victimization of teachers, data derived from questionnaires similar to those filled out by students. (There were no teacher interviews, perhaps because teachers were presumed more capable of understanding the questions and replying appropriately.) Table III on page 22 shows that an appreciable proportion of teachers reported property stolen, but that only a small proportion of teachers reported robberies and assaults. However, robberies were three times as common in inner-city schools as in rural schools, and assaults were nine times as common. Even in big-city secondary schools, less than 2 percent of the teachers surveyed cited assaults by students within the past month, but threats were more frequent. Thirty-six percent of inner-city junior-high-school teachers reported that students threatened to hurt them, as did 24 percent of inner-city high school teachers. Understandably,
Table III. Percent of Teachers Who Reported Being Victimized within the Past Month: Thefts, Robberies, Assaults*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Community Size</th>
<th>Thefts</th>
<th>Robberies</th>
<th>Physical Attacks</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cities of 500,000 population or more</td>
<td>16.7%</td>
<td>1.3%</td>
<td>1.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smaller Cities</td>
<td>15.8</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suburban Areas</td>
<td>12.0</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>0.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural Areas</td>
<td>9.5</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>0.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Source: Violent Schools—Safe Schools, p. 68.

many teachers said they were afraid of their students. Twenty-eight percent of big-city teachers reported hesitating to confront misbehaving students for fear of their own safety, as did 18 percent of smaller-city teachers, 11 percent of suburban teachers, and 7 percent of rural teachers.

Principals were questioned about a variety of crimes against the school as a community: trespassing, breaking and entering, theft of school property, vandalism, and the like. Based on these reports as well as on data collected by the National Center for Educational Statistics in a companion study, Violent Schools—Safe Schools estimated the monetary cost alone of replacing damaged or stolen property as $200 million per year.

2. Are intruders from the outside community responsible for a major portion of school crime, or are the students themselves the main perpetrators of thefts, assaults, robberies, and vandalism? And, if the perpetrators are students, which students?

According to the report, the notion that intruders are responsible for a great deal of school crime is a myth:

Preventive strategies designed to keep “intruders” from entering the school assume that offenses in the school are usually committed by outsiders; relative safety is believed to require keeping students inside the school and others who do not belong there outside.

Our data, however, suggest that rather than locking most offenders out, these strategies seem to lock the offenders in with their potential victims. Except for trespassing and break-ins, the great majority . . . of all reported offenses for which information about offenders is available were committed by current students at the school in question. . . . Even in the case of breaking and entering, slightly more than half (56 percent) of these offenses were committed by current students.

Another belief about perpetrators that the report called into question was that older students preyed on younger students. Although
younger students were disproportionately victimized, three-quarters of those who attacked or robbed them were roughly the same age, according to estimates of the victims themselves.

Schools in which a majority of students were from minority backgrounds had rates of assault and robbery against both students and teachers twice as high as schools where white students predominated. But the data did not explain this finding. The issue is what characteristics of minorities make them more likely to engage in school crime. Here the report offered tantalizing hints that educational failure was causally implicated in school crime, but nothing conclusive. Teachers who said that they taught a majority of low-ability students were five times as likely to report being attacked and twice as likely to report being robbed as teachers who said that less than a third of their students were of low ability. Teachers who said that a majority of their students were "underachievers" were three times as likely to report being attacked and about 50 percent more likely to report being robbed than teachers who said that less than a third of their students were underachievers.

Staff members of the National Institute of Education had anticipated that students would prove to be the main perpetrators of school crime and had planned to include on the student questionnaire questions about crimes the students themselves had committed. This would have provided valuable information about the characteristics of student perpetrators and, inferentially, about perpetrators generally. But boards of education resisted; questioning students about their own crimes, even anonymously, was likely to arouse objections from parents, students, and perhaps from community groups. The plan was dropped.

The report did offer impressions about perpetrators based on its field studies in 10 schools—that is, on extensive observation over a period of at least two weeks in each school, and on intensive interviews with school counselors, school aides, security personnel, parents, and representatives of community organizations. Professor A. J. Ianni of Teachers College, Columbia University, the director of the field studies, had this impression of school-crime perpetrators:

There was general agreement among respondents in many of the schools that a small percentage of students—the figure 10 percent was frequently cited—form a hard core of disruptive students who are responsible for most of the vandalism and violence in schools. While this troublesome group did not seem to be identifiable in terms of any specific racial, ethnic, or socioeconomic status background, school staff commonly described them as students who were also having difficulty
academically, were frequently in trouble in the community, and tended to come from troubled homes. These students were easily identifiable and generally seemed to be known both to staff and other students because of the frequency with which they were in trouble. These same respondents indicated that in their experience this group of troublesome students could find allies among the other students when specific issues, situations, or problems arose. Violence and disruptive behavior is thus described as interactive with a small group of students frequently causing problems and at times setting off a chain reaction among other student groups.

3. Do attacks on and robberies of students occur mainly during classes or mainly before, after, and between classes?

Not surprisingly, violence directed at other students was less likely to occur during classes than at other times. Thus, the presence of teachers seemed to protect students against violence. Apparently, hallways and stairs (where teacher supervision was weak) were the sites for about a third of the violent acts, and other poorly supervised places—toilets, cafeterias, and locker rooms—the sites for another third.

The report did not ask whether violence on the way to and from the school building was a special problem. If the trip to and from school were dangerous for students in the inner cities, such schools would continue to be perceived as dangerous even though violence might be adequately controlled inside the school building itself.

4. Who are the main victims of school crime?

Younger students and the youngest, least-experienced teachers were most likely to be attacked or robbed. However, male students were more than twice as likely to be victims of both forms of violence than female students. And male teachers were somewhat more likely to be attacked than female teachers, although less likely to be robbed. The most likely explanation for the fact that schools are more dangerous for males than for females is that since males are the main authors of violent crimes, their victims tend to be the other males with whom they associate. Propinquity, both physical and psychological, increases the likelihood of victimization.

Propinquity between perpetrators and victims also explains the higher rate of victimization of students and teachers from minority backgrounds than of white students and teachers. Minority students and teachers were more likely to be attacked and robbed because their schools tended to be urban schools with high crime rates.

5. What are the causes of school crime?

The word “cause” does not appear in the index of the report. This was not an oversight. The safe-schools study was designed to
describe the crime problem in American public schools during a short period of time (1976 to 1977), not to probe causes. However, Congress expected that the study would show how school crime could be prevented. And this objective implied some knowledge of causes. The report waffled. It spoke of "potential contributions" to school crime and of "several factors that appear likely to have general explanatory value with respect to school crimes."

But more explicit concern with the causes of school crime would have made possible greater realism about what could be explained and what could be done. For example, even though the report suggested on the basis of other studies that levels of school crime had increased from the 1960's to the 1970's, the safe-schools study itself collected no data on trends in school crime; hence, it could not throw light on causes of the increase in school crime. Furthermore, it could not explain why some youngsters committed crimes and others in the same schools did not; it had not collected data from offenders, only from victims. All the study could do was to contrast the crime rates in some of the 642 schools of the sample with those of others and to attempt to identify characteristics of high-crime and low-crime schools. The report did this. Thus, high levels of violent crime occurred in schools with above-average proportions of children from families of low socioeconomic status and in schools located in high-crime neighborhoods. But its authors were extremely cautious in interpreting the associations in causal terms.

There are hints one can trace out. Among all the schools in the survey—urban, suburban, and rural—a strong relationship existed between laxness in enforcing school rules, as judged by teachers and students in the school, and rate of violent crime. But surrounding neighborhoods of low socioeconomic status and high crime resulted in lax rule enforcement only in urban schools, not in suburban or rural schools. Perhaps in high-crime communities of low socioeconomic status the enforcement of school rules was difficult for teachers and principals but not, as the rural and suburban data showed, impossible. Perhaps an urban school with sufficiently creative leadership could also enforce rules despite its adverse socioeconomic environment.

6. Did the report suggest anything that the federal government can do to reduce crime in the schools?

There were recommendations in the concluding chapter of the report, lots of them—but they were not recommendations for Congressional action nor indeed were they National Institute of Education recommendations. They were suggestions from school princi-
pals, teachers, and students, for controlling school crime. Principals and teachers were asked to write in their own words replies to the following question: "What measures would you recommend to schools having problems with vandalism, personal attacks, and theft?" Students were asked to make recommendations by means of a similar question: "If a school had a problem with personal attacks, theft, and property destruction, what could be done to make it safer?" The answers by principals, teachers, and students were grouped in the same eight categories: 1) security devices, 2) security personnel, 3) discipline and supervision, 4) curriculum and counseling, 5) training and organizational change, 6) physical-plant improvement, 7) parental involvement and community relations, and 8) improvement of school climate. Within each category, responses were carefully coded into subcategories to facilitate statistical tabulation. Although the victims and potential victims of school crime are not necessarily qualified to devise effective solutions, it may be worth noting that "discipline and supervision" was the most popular recommendation of students and teachers as well as of principals.

The report also described—based on questionnaire responses from principals—efforts made by schools to cope with crime, and discussed the modest success (in the opinion of principals) of these different efforts to reduce "vandalism, personal attacks, and thefts." Big-city principals reported the highest proportion of successful practices, mostly in the areas of "security devices" and "discipline and supervision"; Table IV shows that, except for paddling—a measure more popular in rural and suburban schools and in smaller cities—schools in the big cities made the most serious disciplinary and control efforts. Aside from the impressionistic judgments of the principals, the report did not attempt to evaluate the effectiveness of these disciplinary efforts.

Social changes and school crime

The report described the current situation rather than attempting to explain how a less orderly school environment developed. The report did not consider social trends in American society that made it more difficult for public schools to control predatory, violent, or malicious student behavior.

1 The responses classified under this heading included "enforcement of rules, suspensions, etc.," "restitution, payment," "special classes, expulsion," "monitoring, watching," "controlling student movement, I.D.," and others.
Table IV. Percent of Schools Using Various Discipline and Control Procedures, by Location *

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Procedure</th>
<th>Large Cities</th>
<th>Small Cities</th>
<th>Suburban Areas</th>
<th>Rural Areas</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students must show I.D. card to authorized personnel when requested</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students must carry hall passes if out of class</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visitors must check in at the office</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suspension</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expulsion</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paddling</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assignment to special day-long class for disruptive students</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transfer to another regular school (social transfer)</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transfer to special school for disruptive students</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Referral to community mental-health agency as disruptive student</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Source: Violent Schools — Safe Schools, p. 147.

Historically, the development of American public education increasingly separated the school from the students' families and neighborhoods. Even the one-room schoolhouse of rural America represented separation of the educational process from the family. But the consolidated school districts in nonmetropolitan areas and the jumbo schools of the inner city carried separation much further. There were good reasons why large schools developed. The bigger the school, the lower the per-capita cost of education tended to be. The bigger the school, the more feasible it was to hire teachers with academic specialties like art, music, drama, and advanced mathematics. The bigger the school, the more likely that teachers and administrators could operate according to professional standards instead of in response to local sensitivities—for example, in teaching biological evolution or in designing a sex-education curriculum. But the unintended consequence of large schools that operated efficiently by bureaucratic and professional standards was to make them relatively independent of the local community. The advantages of
autonomy were obvious. The disadvantages took longer to reveal themselves.

The main disadvantage was that students developed distinctive subcultures only tangentially related to education. Thus, in the 1950's Professor James S. Coleman showed in his book, *The Adolescent Society*, that American high school students seemed more preoccupied with athletics and personal popularity than with intellectual achievement. Students were “doing their own thing,” and their thing was not what teachers and principals were mainly concerned about. Presumably, if parents had been more closely involved in the educational process, they would have strengthened the academic impact of teachers. Even in the 1950's, student subcultures at school facilitated misbehavior; in New York and other large cities, fights between members of street gangs from different neighborhoods sometimes broke out in secondary schools. However, Soviet achievements in space during the 1950's drew more attention to academic performance than to school crime and misbehavior. Insofar as community adults were brought into schools as teacher aides, they were introduced not to facilitate control over student misbehavior but to improve academic performance.

Until the 1960's and 1970's school administrators did not realize that order is chronically problematical when many hundreds of young people come together for congregate education. Principals did not like to call the police, preferring to organize their own disciplinary procedures. They did not believe in security guards, preferring to use teachers to monitor behavior in the halls and lunchrooms. They did not tell school architects about the need for what has come to be called “defensible space,” and as a result schools were built with too many ways to gain entrance from the outside and too many rooms and corridors where surveillance was difficult. Above all, they did not consider that they had lost control over potential student misbehavior when parents were kept far away, where they could not see or know how their children were behaving. The focus of PTA's was the curriculum, and it was the better-educated, middle-class parents who tended to join them. In short, isolation of the school from the local community always means that if a large enough proportion of students misbehave, teachers and principals cannot maintain order. It was not until the 1960's and 1970's, however, that this potentiality became a reality in many American schools, especially inner-city schools. The following paragraphs come from a case study of a particularly disorderly New York high school reported in *Violent Schools—Safe Schools*:
When the student turmoil in the late 1960's led to frequent fires started by students' dropping matches into other students' lockers, all the lockers, with the exception of those in the gyms, were closed and remain so. As a result, students must carry lunches and other belongings, and these are sometimes stolen when they are left out. Vandalism, while not nearly as dramatic or widespread as it was during the time of the disruptions, still presents problems. The cost to the school in 1976 for repainting or cleaning off graffiti was approximately $5,000. The principal explains that graffiti and the breaking of windows are a constant problem both because of the size of the school and the reduction in the custodial staff.

Another trend helping to explain how a less orderly school environment developed was the continuing pressure to keep children in school longer—on the assumption that children needed all the education they could get to cope with a complicated urban industrial society. The positive side of this development was rising educational levels. Greater proportions of the age cohort graduated from high school and went on to post-secondary education than ever before. The negative aspect of compulsory-school-attendance laws and of informal pressure to stay in school longer was that youngsters who didn't wish further education were compelled to remain in school. They were, in a sense, prisoners; understandably, some of them became troublemakers. When they became insolent, violent, or criminal, there was little the public schools could do about them. (The private schools simply expelled them—that is, sent them to public schools.) Since society now believes that public schools are ultimately responsible for primary and secondary education for all children—those with special physical, emotional, or behavior problems are diverted to special schools only as a last resort—public schools are less able to control their students than they used to be.

**Discovering children's rights**

A third trend indirectly affecting the school-crime problem was the increasing sensitivity of public schools to the rights of children. A generation ago, it was possible for principals to rule schools autocratically, to suspend or expel students without much regard for procedural niceties. Injustices occurred; children were "pushed out" of schools because they were disliked by school officials. But this arbitrariness enabled school administrators to control the situation when real misbehavior occurred. Assaults on teachers were punished so swiftly that they were almost unthinkable. Even disrespectful language was unusual. Today school officials are required to observe
due process in handling student discipline. Hearings are necessary. Witnesses must confirm suspicions. Appeals are provided for. Greater democratization of schools means that unruly students get better protection against school officials, and most students get less protection from their classmates.

Related to this third trend is a fourth: the decreased ability of schools to get help with discipline problems from the juvenile courts. Like the schools themselves, the juvenile courts have become more attentive to children's rights and less willing to exile children to a correctional Siberia. More than a decade ago the Supreme Court ruled in the Gault case that children could not be sent to juvenile prisons for "rehabilitation" unless proof existed that they had committed some crime for which imprisonment was appropriate.

The Gault decision set off a revolution in juvenile-court procedures and fostered a growing reluctance on the part of juvenile-court judges to send youngsters "away." Furthermore, a number of state legislatures restricted the discretion of juvenile-court judges. In New York and New Jersey, for example, juvenile-court judges may not commit a youngster to correctional institutions for "status offenses"—that is, for behavior that would not be a crime if done by adults. Thus truancy or ungovernable behavior in school or at home are not grounds for incarceration in New York and New Jersey. Many experts believe that the differentiation of juvenile delinquents from "Persons in Need of Supervision" is a progressive reform. But one consequence of this reform is that the public schools cannot easily persuade juvenile courts to act in school-problem cases. Student abuse of teachers, for example, is more difficult to cope with.

These social changes provide background for understanding the most important change of all: the erosion of the authority of the classroom teacher. If run-of-the-mill teachers could control effectively the behavior of students in their classes, in hallways, and in lunchrooms, there would be considerably less school violence—though theft and vandalism still might be problems. Nowadays some individual teachers can control their classes through personal charisma. But what has changed is that the role of teacher no longer has the prestige it once did for students and their parents, and so less forceful, less experienced, or less effective teachers cannot rely on the prestige of the role to maintain control. They are on their own in a sense that the previous generation of teachers was not. The most visible symptom of loss of automatic respect is assaults on teachers, mainly from students—but occasionally from parents themselves!
According to the report, somewhat more than 1 percent of American seventh-, eighth-, and ninth-grade teachers were assaulted by their students every month. Male teachers reported being attacked more frequently than female teachers, younger teachers more often than older teachers, inexperienced teachers more than experienced teachers, minority teachers more than white teachers.

What happened to erode the almost sacred status of teachers? This question was not dealt with in the report. Doubtless, lessened respect for teachers is related to fundamental cultural changes by which many authority figures—parents, police, government officials, military leaders, employers—have been removed from psychological pedestals. In the case of teachers, however, the general demythologizing process was amplified by special criticism. Best-selling books of the 1960's like John Holt's *Why Children Fail*, James Herndon's *The Way It Spozed to Be*, Jonathan Kozol's *Death at an Early Age: The Destruction of the Minds and Hearts of Negro Children in the Boston Public Schools*, and Herbert Kohl's *36 Children*, portrayed teachers, especially white middle-class teachers, as the villains of education—insensitive, authoritarian, and even racist. The failure of large numbers of children in inner-city schools to learn as much as they ought to have learned by national standards was interpreted as a responsibility of the schools and of the teachers. These books did not pretend to be quantitative surveys. They made no estimates of the percentages of American teachers who resembled the anecdotal examples the authors provided. But the consistency of the illustrations created an image of American teachers as, at best, inept and unfeeling.

The authors probably intended to exonerate youngsters for lack of academic success by portraying them as victims of failings in the educational system. *The effect on readers was to blame teachers for the poor results.* To be sure, few inner-city residents read these books. Yet the anti-establishment ideas that they contained percolated through American society as the clichés of television interviews and college education courses. Because the 1960's witnessed an enormous growth of enrollments in higher education, especially of minority community-college students, the notion that teachers could not be trusted spread from these books to college classrooms to American families, including minority families. Striking a teacher might almost appear to be a deserved punishment. Of course, only a tiny percentage of students and their parents subscribed to this ideologically extreme position. Even among parents and students who assaulted teachers, momentary anger rather than ideological
conviction was probably the predominant motivation. Nevertheless, ideologically motivated attacks had symbolic impact. They suggested to children who witnessed them or heard about them that distrust of teachers must have some basis. Why else were people so angry? Thus ideological extremism fed on itself, increasing the mutual suspicions of students and teachers in inner-city schools and motivating some teachers to retire early and others to leave the teaching profession for other occupations.

Another indication of the erosion of teacher authority has been the decline of homework in secondary schools. When teachers could depend on all but a handful of students to turn in required written homework, they could assign homework and mean it. The slackers could be disciplined. But when teachers can no longer count on a majority of students doing their homework, the assignment of homework becomes a meaningless ritual, and many teachers give up. Of course, when homework is negligible, classroom instruction is less effective. The decline of homework also suggests that teachers lack authority to induce students to do anything they don’t want to do: to attend school regularly, to keep quiet so an orderly recitation can proceed, to refrain from annoying a disliked classmate. Indeed, there are American public schools where one-third of the enrolled students are absent on an average school day. In the classrooms of such schools, teachers cannot build on information communicated and presumably learned during the previous lesson, because so many members of the class missed it.

To sum up: I believe school crime can best be understood in the context of social changes that separated secondary schools from effective family and neighborhood influences, that have kept older adolescents enrolled in school whether they craved education or not, that made it extremely difficult for schools to expel students guilty of intractable and even violent behavior, and that reduced the authority of classroom teachers.

**Why care about school crime?**

School crime receives attention mainly because individual teachers and students are assaulted and their property stolen or because the school’s property is stolen or damaged. A more pernicious aspect of school crime, however, is that it reduces the effectiveness of public education, particularly in large cities.

Crime and the anticipation of crime in the past decade reduced teacher and student commitment to the educational process. Teach-
ers in high-crime schools became less ready to demand from students in-class and out-of-class effort: Learning is work, and many teachers grew afraid to insist on what students regarded as unpleasant. They also became afraid to intervene when students fought or attacked another teacher. Some teachers found their role so different from what they had expected that they abandoned the teaching profession entirely or transferred to safer ("better") schools. Some older teachers chose to retire early. Most teachers—having invested too much in a professional career to quit—continued to serve, but with low morale. Students began to reject the educational process. They cut classes more than previous generations of students, and they took unauthorized absences of days and sometimes weeks. They complained that they weren't learning much in school—and they were right.

Those parents aware of the inadequate progress of their children in reading and arithmetic sometimes tried to correct the situation. For families with the economic resources to do so, the easiest way was to transfer their children to private or parochial schools or to move to suburban communities with reputations for good schools. Parents without the means to transfer their children could only attempt to make the local schools better, possibly by joining the PTA. But, in truth, parents could not have much impact, given the organizational and geographic isolation of the school from the local community.

The effect of this process of deterioration was to alter the role of the public school in underprivileged neighborhoods of big cities. American public schools have traditionally taught basic skills that all persons need to know in order to participate effectively in a complex industrial society. But they also served to select for post-secondary education youngsters whose native abilities and personal motivation prepared them for responsible and prestigious occupations. "Opportunity" was an incentive legitimizing the school in the eyes of the parents as well as students, and thereby justifying teacher authority. However, as crime grew more serious in big-city schools, they became less and less functional as a channel of social ascent for able students from disadvantaged backgrounds; they became traps instead of springboards. (The relentless support of the NAACP for busing to promote racial integration in public education should be understood against a background of disorder in big-city secondary schools that increasingly serve a minority clientele. Whatever else busing accomplishes, it promises to enroll minority students in safer and educationally more effective schools than they
Controlling violence in urban schools is thus not only desirable for its own sake, but also for the possibility of ameliorating two of the intractable problems of American education: 1) the draining away of better students and the consequent increase of racial segregation in the public schools of the largest central cities, and 2) educational ineffectiveness in those schools so serious as to prevent even intellectually able students from learning enough. To put the matter more dramatically, failure to control the violence problem in big-city schools means that urban public schools cannot propel youngsters from disadvantaged families toward successful occupational careers.

One way to avoid this conclusion is to assert that the causal order is not from violence to educational ineffectiveness to the flight from high-crime schools by better students, but rather that schools that arouse frustration and resentment in their students erupt in school crime. This is essentially the thesis of the Children's Defense Fund. According to the Fund, American schools are excessively arbitrary, especially with minority students, and suspend and expel students from school for trivial reasons unrelated to the educational process. The Children's Defense Fund refers to the "pushout problem" and argues that the disproportionate representation of black youngsters among those suspended or expelled is evidence at least of arbitrary standards and probably of racism on the part of school officials. The Fund's position is that schoolchildren need advocates to protect their legitimate interests against the oppressive authority of teachers and principals, and that more "due process" rather than less will reduce student frustration and therefore violence. Partisans of the youth-advocacy approach to crime reduction in the schools convinced the Senate Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency of the correctness of this approach. The Subcommittee's 1975 report, Our Nation's Schools—A Report Card: "A" in School Violence and Vandalism, put it this way:

One common thread of particular interest to the Subcommittee running through many of the underlying causes of school violence and vandalism is what may be called the crisis of due process. Quite naturally schools, like other institutions, are compelled to issue rules and regulations concerning the conduct of persons within their jurisdiction. It is clear that without fair and meaningful control and discipline the schools would quickly lose their ability to educate students. Increasingly, though, educators and administrators are finding that the extent of stu-
dent conduct which is sought to be regulated, as well as the methods of regulation, are causing more problems than they are controlling. A 1975 NEA study interviewed a large number of students from different schools and found that "many students spoke of the need for consistent, fair discipline."

For example, the Subcommittee found that in numerous institutions across the country, students, administrators and teachers are embroiled in constant ongoing disputes over restrictions on hair style, smoking, hall passes, student newspapers and a myriad of other aspects of school life.

According to the Senate Subcommittee, the schools' failings in the area of due process incite students to violence, as do arbitrary expulsions and suspensions. The Subcommittee Report made the connections as follows:

At first glance it might appear that the expulsion, suspension, pushout, force out and truancy phenomenon [sic], although certainly tragic for those involved, might at least create a somewhat more orderly atmosphere for those remaining in school as a result of the absence of youngsters evidently experiencing problems adjusting to the school environment. The opposite, however, appears to be the case. The Syracuse study, for instance, found that in schools where the average daily attendance was lower, the disruptions, violence and vandalism rates were higher. This may be explained by the fact that the vast majority of students who are voluntarily or compulsively [sic] excluded from schools do, in time, return to those schools. In many instances their frustrations and inadequacies which caused their absence in the first place have only been heightened by their exclusion and the school community will likely find itself a convenient and meaningful object of revenge.

It is not possible to dismiss the arguments of the Children's Defense Fund, the Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency, and the various proponents of youth advocacy out of hand. Nonetheless, it seems more plausible that school violence lowers the effectiveness of the educational process through the fears that it arouses than that arbitrary school rules so enrage students that they rob and steal from each other and teachers, and perpetrate assaults and vandalism. Conceivably though, some students seek revenge on teachers, on the school building, and on their fellow students for perceived unjust treatment.

Violent-Schools—Safe-Schools asked students and teachers questions about their perception of the fairness of school rules; a scale of perceived school fairness was constructed. Did schools where students and teachers felt the rules were unfair have higher levels of violence than schools in which students and teachers
thought the rules were fairer? Apparently not in the urban junior
and senior high schools where the violence problem is most acute.
The tendency for "less fair" schools to have higher violence rates
virtually disappeared when other co-varying causal factors were
statistically removed. Thus, in addition to being implausible, the
hypothesis that student resentment of unfair rules contributes sub-
stantially to school violence did not stand up under empirical test.

How to reduce school crime

Reducing school crime requires a long-run strategy rather than a
search for panaceas. Informal influences, such as greater parental
involvement, might prove useful in controlling school crime. In-
formal social controls are a factor in human behavior generally—
and certainly in adolescent behavior in schools. To fail to utilize in-
formal controls is to throw the entire burden of preventing school
crime on formal agencies of control: security guards, teachers, prin-
cipals. But channeling informal influences is more complicated
than hiring security guards or buying stronger locks. Time and
effort must be devoted to developing practical programs.

Parents and other neighborhood adults are already employed in
urban elementary schools as teacher aides; they are supposed to in-
crease the effectiveness of classroom teachers. They may also con-
tribute to a more orderly classroom atmosphere. But in secondary
schools teacher aides are rare. (Paraprofessionals seem less useful for
helping the teacher of specialized subjects.) If it could be arranged,
the routine presence of parents in junior and senior high schools
might have appreciable effects on crime rates and on the fear of
crime, whether or not parents make a direct contribution to aca-
demic achievement.

But how can the presence of neighborhood adults in school build-
ings be justified? One possibility is to hire them to perform useful
services that justify their being in lunchrooms, halls, stairways, of-
fices, and even classrooms. Hiring parents for their indirect impact
on school crime is expensive. And, indeed, the informal control re-
sulting from a parental presence in secondary schools might be
achieved more cheaply. Schools are already used for adult-education
courses in evening hours. Such courses could be scheduled for the
school day. If crime reduction were attained at the price of in-
creased congestion and of reduced autonomy for teachers and prin-
cipals, most people would consider the tradeoff worth it.

Greater efforts could be made to involve another informal influ-
ence, the peer group, in the control of school crime. This has already been done, reportedly with success, in vandalism control. The cost of vandalism for a previous year is calculated, and the student body collectively is given the monetary equivalent of the reduction in property damage for the current year. There have also been efforts to heighten the consciousness of students about school crime through public discussions. Although these steps are in the right direction, they do not seem to mobilize strong peer sanctions against more serious crime. What is needed is sustained thought and experimentation to discover the most effective way to motivate students to disapprove of predatory behavior. Again, a long view is required.

But along with a long-term perspective for school-crime reduction there must be a set of priorities. For not even the federal government can deal with all school crime in all of the urban, suburban, and rural areas of 50 states and the District of Columbia. Some types of school crime, while undesirable, are not major threats to public education. Marijuana and alcohol use on school premises probably belong in this category; perhaps vandalism and after-hours burglaries are also bearable costs in an affluent society. On the other hand, violent crimes at school are serious threats to the viability of public education. Controlling them should be the first priority of a safe-schools strategy.

School violence is most serious in big-city junior high schools, where assaults and robberies are more than twice as frequent as in senior high schools. Furthermore, a major factor in junior-high-school crime is that junior highs are pressed to keep troublesome students because of compulsory-school-attendance laws. Expulsion is theoretically possible, but difficult in practice. A junior-high-school student who attacks a teacher may be given a five-day suspension, whereas a high school student committing the same offense would be expelled. High schools have greater proportions of voluntary students. True, some high school students are trapped by the school-attendance laws in the ninth or tenth grades, but they are outnumbered by students legally free to drop out—and therefore possible candidates for expulsion for misbehavior. These considerations explain why the problem of coping with school violence is more difficult in junior high schools than in other public secondary schools.

Can violence be controlled in big-city junior high schools? “Youth advocates” believe that designing more intriguing curricula and selecting more stimulating teachers will reduce violence. Yet no curriculum is universally intriguing, and no teacher can be stimulating all the time. Public schools may not be responsive enough to their
clienteles, as proponents of youth advocacy allege, but responsiveness or lack of it is only marginally relevant to the problem of violence. Rural schools are the least responsive and the safest; some of them paddle students and conduct strip-searches for drugs. What makes violence likely is weak control. Big-city junior high schools have high rates of assault and robbery because they contain a handful of violent students whom they cannot control and cannot extrude, and because they have not devised credible rewards and punishments for the larger group of potentially violent youngsters who are susceptible to deterrence. Addressing these two weaknesses of control will enable big-city junior high schools to reduce violence. But coping with these weaknesses involves painful measures, not the cost-free “solutions” suggested by youth advocates.

First, to rid the junior high schools of the small percentage of violent students who have proved that they cannot be controlled by anyone, the public schools should be allowed to use expulsion more freely. This means recognizing that the limits to the right of students to remain in school for educational purposes are reached when their presence jeopardizes the education of classmates. Expulsion is a drastic remedy. Though home instruction and alternative schools will be available for expelled students, the likelihood is that expelled students will not make much further academic progress. That is sad. Nevertheless, society must be permitted to give up on students who are threatening the educational opportunities of their classmates.

Milder sanctions

The second remedy is linked to the first. It may be possible to devise innovative lesser punishments for misbehavior provided that more drastic punishments (such as expulsion) are available should the lesser sanctions fail. Suppose, for example, that a student subject to expulsion for slapping a teacher is offered the option of working 14 hours every weekend at the school—painting, scrubbing, polishing—for three months. Supervision is given by paid college students from the local community working alongside the offender. The offender receives no pay; he is being punished, not rewarded by participation in an employment program. Perhaps the assaultive student prefers expulsion to hard work on his “free” weekends. (Experience with coerced community service in New Zealand—called “periodic detention”—demonstrated that some offenders preferred jailing for a period of time to labor-punishment on the installment plan.) On the other hand, his parents may prefer that he remain in
school; they press him to accept the weekend penalty and, reluctantly, he agrees. But what happens if he does not show up for his weekend drudgery? In New Zealand the failure to report for weekend work without a medical excuse results in a bench warrant being issued, and the youngster goes to jail. Were magistrates unwilling to issue bench warrants, periodic detention could not succeed; periodic detention is not a Quaker work project. In order for coerced community service to be effective as a sanction for controlling school crime, boards of education would have to expel youngsters who dropped out of the program.

The parallel is not exact. Expulsion from school may be perceived by offenders as not wholly undesirable. The New Zealand experience is with jail, not with expulsion from school. Only experimentation can show whether expulsion is a sufficient threat to motivate the majority of offenders to abide by a lesser penalty. If not, the cooperation of juvenile courts would be necessary. Since school violence is delinquency, and legally subject to the juvenile or criminal courts, judges can stand behind school-imposed disciplinary measures with the more drastic threat of incarceration. To be sure, mention of expulsion or incarceration in relation to school crime horrifies “youth advocates,” and the hope, of course, would be that these fairly severe sanctions need rarely be used. Experimentation is necessary to find out whether the threat of such sanctions is sufficient to ensure compliance.

Experimentation is also necessary with more palatable forms of influencing student behavior: rewards for good behavior rather than punishment for bad. Psychologists say that “positive reinforcement” is more effective than punishment, and positive reinforcement does not involve denying some students educational opportunities in order to preserve educational opportunities for others. Unfortunately, it is difficult to hook all students on the rewards offered by principals, teachers, and conforming students. According to sociologists, the basic social reward is approval, but teachers cannot easily bestow approval upon students who are uninterested in the curriculum and flout the behavioral rules of the classroom. Furthermore, such students are likely to receive approval for their disruptive behavior from close friends and to weigh this approval against the disapproval of teachers, principals, and the majority of the student body. Consequently, as desirable as it is to search experimentally for rewards that will help control violent crime in big-city junior high schools, the likelihood is that punishments will also be necessary, and that to protect the educational process the penalties of expulsion...
and referral to the juvenile-justice system will have to be used for the foreseeable future.

Americans are not patient or fatalistic. Given a national problem as unpleasant as school violence, our tendency is to attempt to do something about it—fast. Unfortunately, a crash program may not ameliorate the situation; it may even make the problem worse. School violence has not triggered our usual activist response. There have been stories in the mass media, hearings in the Congress, studies by the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, but surprisingly little in the way of systematic national effort to reduce school crime. Part of the reason that school violence has been handled gingerly is the American tradition of local control over education. The main role for the federal government has been to supply funds for school programs that the Congress and the President deem worthy. Another reason is the concentration of the problem in big cities—where it is entangled with other difficult problems. So far about all that has happened is that urban school districts have improved control over entry to and exit from school buildings and have stationed security guards in the schools. *Violent Schools—Safe Schools* summarized the situation:

> More than one-third of all big-city schools employ trained security personnel; more than half of the big-city junior high schools have them, as do two-thirds of all big-city senior high schools. In suburban areas the proportion is much lower (7 percent), and in rural schools their use is negligible (1 percent).

Meanwhile, other efforts at control illuminate ironic twists of “children’s rights” in practice, as when big-city school systems attempt to move violent students from one school to another. The rationale for such transfers is that youngsters may start fresh in a new school where they do not have a bad reputation. But the case study of one inner-city junior high school, called “Rogers” in the report, shows how this system of musical chairs works in practice:

> Since it is not legally possible to expel students considered disruptive, it is customary at Rogers as in other schools, to transfer students to other schools. By board regulation, the school is not permitted to inform the receiving school of the reason for the transfer or to provide any disciplinary records. “This can present some real problems,” the dean says of the confidentiality requirement: “We had a kid last year who slashed another kid’s throat with a razor blade and we finally had to transfer him to one of the intermediate schools, but we couldn’t tell them officially what he had done or even that they should keep an eye on him because he was potentially violent.”
No one knows whether transferring violent students from school to school reduces the total amount of violence in big-city school systems. Yet in any case humane considerations suggest that after a student has committed violent acts against students or teachers in a school, they ought not to have to encounter him in the corridors day after day. (In point of fact, it is at least as common for victims—both teachers and students—to transfer out voluntarily as it is for perpetrators to be compelled to transfer.)

What is being done?

On August 30, 1978, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention of the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration announced in the *Federal Register* a national initiative to combat school crime. Proposals were invited for a National School Resource Network; one grant of as much as $2,500,000 would be made for an initial 15-month period to finance the successful proposal. The presumption was that further grants would be made to maintain the School Resource Network if it seemed promising. Here is how the solicitation justified the new initiative:

At the present time, there is no overall or resource strategy to assist schools in meeting the challenge of serious school crime. Resources are minimal and fragmented with little capacity to develop new resources to meet this challenge. The development of a nationwide school resource network dedicated to systematic advocacy, reform, and a safer environment on behalf of students and teachers is needed to provide overall direction and coordination of existing and new school resources. The promotion of due process, fairness and consistency in school security, and disciplinary policies and practices is important in assisting schools to develop and operate crime prevention and control programs.

The words have a pleasant sound, but it was not obvious what the School Resource Network was supposed to do. Later in the solicitation, the strategy of John M. Rector, then Administrator of the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, became clearer. Rector's approach was to move information from schools that had learned to cope with crime to schools that had not. Rector explained in a paragraph included under the heading, "technical assistance":

The grantee shall produce technical assistance packages containing a variety of information materials on serious school violence and vandalism prevention. Sufficient copies of each package shall be produced to allow dissemination to appropriate technical assistance specialists in the national school resource network system. The information materials
to be included in each package shall include, but not be limited to, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention publications and materials such as the national evaluation reports, model school crime prevention programs and research reports, abstracts, bibliographies, grant project summaries, brochures, directories, and pamphlets. Materials developed and compiled should take into account regional, local and ethnic minority differences.

The dissemination of information about school violence will be helpful. But in order for improved communication to serve as the cornerstone of a national strategy for the control of school violence, some schools must be markedly more successful at coping with school violence than others. All that would then be necessary is to package the secret and send it around the country. But if, as is true especially in the inner cities, all schools are groping more or less ineffectively, a national strategy for coping with school crime should stress the systematic search for new approaches.2

The National School Resource Network is currently the main effort of the federal government, and local school systems are planning no new initiatives of their own. Nevertheless, school violence may diminish somewhat. The decline of births that began in the 1960's is likely to help. Junior-high-school enrollments have begun to fall. With smaller numbers of students, teachers and security guards are better able to defuse potentially explosive situations. Furthermore, teachers and principals have learned from their difficult experiences of the past decade; they know what to expect. They are less likely to become demoralized than the missionary-teachers who streamed into big-city schools in the 1960's—and streamed out again when they discovered that the role required less a guru than a policeman. Waiting passively for school violence to go away means relying on the happenstance of demography and other natural forces to cope with the problem. There is another possibility: that parents will become indignant enough about violent schools to make safer schools a political issue. Let's hope so.

2 The failure of Mr. Rector's solicitation to include a research-and-development component was partly personal idiosyncrasy. A lawyer by training, Rector was doubtful that social-science research could demonstrate the usefulness of an approach that practitioners were not already using—somewhere. This prejudice forced the School Resource Network to rely on what little was known about the control of school violence; Rector's strategy was to get the pamphlets in the mail. Rector was dismissed as Administrator in June 1979. Whether his successor will try to extricate the National School Resource Network from its presently-designed role is not yet known.