

Crime, Violence, Discipline, and Safety in U.S. Public Schools

Findings From the School Survey on Crime and Safety: 2021-22

First Look—Summary Report

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Introduction

Using data from the School Survey on Crime and Safety (SSOCS), this report presents findings both on crime and violence in U.S. public schools and on the practices and programs schools have used to promote school safety. SSOCS is managed by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) within the U.S. Department of Education's Institute of Education Sciences. The survey has been fielded nine times, most recently during the 2021-22 school year. The 2021-22 SSOCS (SSOCS:2022) was funded jointly with the Department's Office of Safe and Supportive Schools.

SSOCS collects data from public school principals about violent and nonviolent crimes in their schools. The survey also collects data on school security measures, school security staff, mental health services, parent and community involvement at school, and staff training on school discipline and safety policies and practices. SSOCS data can be used to study how violent incidents in schools relate to the programs and practices that schools have in place to prevent crime. In addition to collecting data on these core topics, SSOCS:2022 collected data on schools' responses to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic during the 2021-22 school year.

The national sample for SSOCS:2022 was made up of 4,800 U.S. public schools.¹ Data collection for SSOCS:2022 began on February 15, 2022, and continued through July 19, 2022. Data collection was conducted primarily through the use of an online questionnaire, with a paper questionnaire provided in mailings sent later in the data collection period.

A total of 2,687 elementary, middle, high/secondary, and combined/other schools² responded, yielding a weighted response rate of 60.1 percent. Since the response rate was less than 85 percent, a unit nonresponse bias analysis was performed. The results showed that nonresponding schools were significantly different from responding schools; however, they also showed that weighting adjustments removed much of the observed nonresponse bias. Weighting should also reduce nonresponse bias in the survey estimates, although some may remain. For more information about the

¹ The SSOCS sample frame includes regular public schools, public charter schools, and schools with partial or total magnet programs. The SSOCS sample frame excludes private schools, special education schools, vocational schools, alternative schools, virtual schools, newly closed schools, home schools, ungraded schools, schools with a highest grade of kindergarten or lower, Department of Defense schools, schools sponsored by the Bureau of Indian Education, and schools in the U.S. outlying areas and Puerto Rico.

² *Elementary* schools are defined as schools that enroll students in more of grades K-4 than in higher grades. *Middle* schools are defined as schools that enroll students in more of grades 5-8 than in higher or lower grades. *High/secondary* schools are defined as schools that enroll students in more of grades 9-12 than in lower grades. *Combined/other* schools include those with all other combinations of grades, including K-12 schools. School-level categories in SSOCS:2020 and SSOCS:2022 differ from those in previous survey administrations; thus, caution should be exercised when comparing estimates by school level over time. For more information, see the School Characteristic (Row) Variables section of Appendix B: Description of Variables.

response rates and the nonresponse bias analysis, see Appendix C: Methodology and Technical Notes.

The purpose of this First Look report is to introduce new data by presenting selected descriptive information from SSOCS:2022. The tables in the report contain counts and percentages produced from data that have been weighted to represent U.S. public schools. Tables of standard errors are provided in appendix A. The report also includes selected findings and figures. Together, the tables, findings, and figures show the range of data available from the survey rather than a full review of all observed differences. A description of the variables presented in the tables is provided in appendix B.

Comparisons made in the report were tested to make sure differences accounted for margins of error due to sampling. Student's *t* tests were used for testing with a .05 significance threshold. Adjustments for multiple comparisons were not made. Many of the variables examined are related to one another, and complex interactions and relationships have not been explored. For information about how to compare estimates in the tables, see the Statistical Tests section of appendix C.

More information about the SSOCS survey, publications, and data products can be found at <https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/ssocs>.

For readers interested in appendixes with tables of estimates, definitions of terms used in the findings and tables, and additional information about the survey from which the findings are drawn, please see the “View full report” link at <https://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2024043>.

Selected Findings: School Year 2021-22

- During the 2021-22 school year, about 857,500 violent incidents and 479,500 nonviolent incidents were recorded by U.S. public schools.^{3,4} Sixty-seven percent of schools reported having at least one violent incident, and 59 percent reported having at least one nonviolent incident (table 1) (figure 1).
- Sixty-one percent of schools reported at least one physical attack or fight without a weapon. Four percent of schools reported such an attack with a weapon (table 2).
- Three percent of all public schools (approximately 3,000 schools) reported that at least one hate crime occurred at school during the 2021-22 school year. The rate was higher in schools with over 1,000 students (8 percent) than in schools with lower enrollments (ranging from 2 to 4 percent) (table 3).
- About 71 percent of high/secondary schools reported at least one incident of distribution, possession, or use of illegal drugs, a higher percentage than reported incidents of distribution, possession, or use of alcohol (34 percent) or prescription drugs (18 percent) (table 4).
- Bullying at school at least once a week was reported by 28 percent of middle schools, compared to 15 percent of high/secondary schools and 10 percent of elementary schools. Similarly, cyberbullying at school or away from school at least once a week was reported by 37 percent of middle schools and 25 percent of high/secondary schools, compared to 6 percent of elementary schools (table 5).
- Sixty-five percent of all public schools reported having a threat assessment⁵ team. These teams were less common in rural schools (54 percent) than in town (64 percent), suburb (69 percent), and city schools (71 percent) (table 6).
- Ninety percent of all public schools reported they increased social and emotional support for students in response to the coronavirus pandemic. Across regions, this percentage ranged from 88 percent of schools in the South to 94 percent of schools in the Northeast. The percentage was higher for schools in the Northeast than for schools in the Midwest and South (table 7) (figure 2).

³ Violent incidents include rape or attempted rape, sexual assault other than rape (including threatened rape), robbery (with or without a weapon), physical attack or fight (with or without a weapon), and threat of physical attack (with or without a weapon). Nonviolent incidents include theft or larceny; possession of a firearm or explosive device; possession of a knife or sharp object; distribution, possession, or use of illegal drugs or alcohol; vandalism; and inappropriate distribution, possession, or use of prescription drugs.

⁴ The 95 percent confidence interval for “violent incidents” ranges from 840,700 to 1,036,300. The 95 percent confidence interval for “nonviolent incidents” ranges from 456,700 to 517,300.

⁵ “Threat assessment” was defined as a formalized process of identifying, assessing, and managing students who may pose a threat of targeted violence in schools.

- During the 2021-22 school year, 92 percent of public schools had a formal plan to prepare for and respond to multi-country or worldwide pandemic disease.⁶ Schools had plans describing the procedures to be performed in various other crisis scenarios as well. Some of the most commonly reported plans were for active shooters (96 percent), natural disasters (96 percent), suicide threats or incidents (94 percent), and bomb threats (92 percent) (table 8) (figure 3).
- About 72 percent of charter schools reported involving students in restorative practices.⁷ This was higher than the percentage for traditional public schools (58 percent) (table 9).
- Schools were asked about the extent to which certain factors limited their efforts to reduce or prevent crime. The two factors reported most often as limiting these efforts “in a major way” were lack of or inadequate alternative placements or programs for disruptive students (30 percent) and inadequate funding (27 percent). Schools were also asked about the extent to which certain factors limited their efforts to provide mental health services to students. The two factors reported most often as limiting these efforts “in a major way” were inadequate access to licensed mental health professionals⁸ and inadequate funding (39 percent each) (table 10).
- Schools reported on the different types of security staff that were present at school at least once a week. This included School Resource Officers (SROs), which are sworn law enforcement officers with arrest authority, who have specialized training and are assigned to work in collaboration with school organizations, as well as other sworn law enforcement officers who are not SROs and other security officers or security personnel that are not sworn law enforcement. About 46 percent of traditional public schools had an SRO present at school at least once a week. This was higher than the percentage of charter schools (18 percent). In contrast, a higher percentage of charter schools reported having security officers or security personnel (35 percent) compared to traditional public schools (25 percent) (table 11).
- A lower percentage of schools located in cities (30 percent) reported that one or more sworn law enforcement officers (including School Resource Officers) routinely carried a firearm while at school during the 2021-22 school year than schools located in suburbs (45 percent), towns (54 percent), and rural areas (55 percent) (table 12) (figure 4).

⁶ The coronavirus pandemic, COVID-19, was included on the survey as the example.

⁷ “Restorative practices” was defined as a formal mediation process led by a facilitator that brings affected parties of a problem together to explore what happened, reflect on their roles, find a solution, and ultimately restore harmony to individual relationships and the larger community. An example was “peace or conflict circles.”

⁸ Licensed mental health professionals may include psychiatrists, psychologists, psychiatric or mental health nurse practitioners, psychiatric or mental health nurses, clinical social workers, and professional counselors.

- During the 2021-22 school year, 49 percent of all schools provided diagnostic mental health assessments⁹ to evaluate students for mental health disorders. Thirty-eight percent of all schools provided treatment¹⁰ to students for mental health disorders (table 13).

⁹ “Diagnostic mental health assessment” was defined for respondents as an evaluation conducted by a mental health professional that identifies whether an individual has one or more mental health diagnoses. This is in contrast to an educational assessment, which does not focus on clarifying a student’s mental health diagnosis.

¹⁰ “Treatment” was defined for respondents as a clinical intervention addressed at lessening or eliminating the symptoms of a mental health disorder. This may include psychotherapy, medication treatment, and/or counseling.