



## CURBING SCHOOL VIOLENCE—OR FUELING IT?

**E**xtensive media attention to incidents of school violence in recent years seems to indicate that schools are becoming more dangerous and life-threatening all the time. These unfortunate events—and the hype they receive in the media—are having a significant impact on our perceptions of safety in schools. A Gallup poll taken in April 2000 revealed that 30 percent of respondents thought another incident like the one in Columbine, CO, was “very likely” to happen again, 36 percent said “somewhat likely,” and only 15 percent said “very unlikely.”

But an article in *salon.com* on March 9, 2001, entitled “Deadly Consequences,” reports that violence by youths has actually *dropped* dramatically in the last few years. Frank Zimring, a law professor at the University of California at Berkeley, said that the juvenile murder rate is at its lowest level in 20 years, and that schools are actually the safest place children can be.

### The Power of Perception

So how are these perceptions about school violence playing out in our schools and our society? According to the article, some experts think that our current panic may be adversely affecting our attempts to curb the violence. For example, zero-tolerance policies, which schools use to crack down on potentially violent kids, “may not only be ineffective but may actually backfire.” Jaana Juvonen, a behavioral scientist at the Rand Institute, says that such tactics focus so much on punishment that they fail to address the motives behind the violent behavior. Also, the strictness of such policies may alienate kids and thus actually *increase* their risk for future behavioral problems.

The greatest damage that zero tolerance and other tough-on-crime

### YOUR WORKOUT CHALLENGE

*Systems Thinking Workout* is designed to help you flex your systems thinking muscles. In this column, we introduce scenarios that contain interesting systemic structures. We then encourage you to read the story; identify what you see as the most relevant structures and themes; capture them graphically in causal loop diagrams, behavior over time graphs, or stock and flow diagrams; and, if you choose, send the diagrams to us with comments about why the dynamics you identified are important and where

you think leverage might be for making lasting change. We’ll publish selected diagrams and comments in a subsequent issue of the newsletter. Fax your diagrams and analysis to (781) 894-7175, or e-mail them to [editorial@pegasuscom.com](mailto:editorial@pegasuscom.com).

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policies may effect is that they inadvertently encourage kids to keep quiet when they learn that a friend or classmate is threatening violent action. Teens may be reluctant to tell an adult because they don’t want to get their friends in trouble, mostly because they know of the dire consequences that will result.

### Addressing School Violence

Juvonen also claims, “There is some preliminary evidence to show that in these schools where they have metal detectors and use security checks—where the physical safety issues are very salient—that that’s where kids’ anxieties are heightened. It’s a constant reminder of how unsafe the school is.” Thus, the most important intervention to curbing school violence may be creating a sense of psychological safety. A surgeon general report early in 2001 echoed this sentiment by asking the public to consider school violence a health issue that needs to be carefully researched and addressed. The report recommended that we study stress factors at home and in the community that are caused by violence, drugs, or other negative behaviors, and figure out how to address those social issues as a root cause of school violence.

The report also stated that “Incarcerating teenagers or trying them in adult court for their offenses only makes it more likely that they will become criminals for life.” California’s Proposition 21, a ballot measure that passed in 2000, requires that teenagers as young as 14 who are facing murder charges must be tried as adults. This law is among the harshest of the tough-on-crime policies.

We may not know for some time the outcome of different approaches to preventing school violence, especially as some statistics imply that teenage violence is already on a downturn. But it bears considering that sometimes the very solution we think will address a problem may only make that problem worse. ■

—Kellie Wardman O’Reilly

Source: “Deadly Consequences” by Fiona Morgan, *salon.com*, March 9, 2001.

### YOUR THOUGHTS

Does a systemic analysis of these trends suggest alternative ways to address the issue of school violence? Let us know what you think!