

Snapshot Results of the 2012 National School Violence Study

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The Centre for Justice and Crime Prevention's (CJCP) 2008 National School Violence Study (NSVS) was a landmark investigation that provided reliable and empirical data on the nature and extent of violence occurring in primary and secondary schools across the country. The 2008 study highlighted the plight of many learners who succumbed to various forms of violence, including bullying, at school.

Since 2008, incidents of school violence have continued to be portrayed in the media, sparking renewed calls by practitioners and the lay public alike for something to be done about the violence plaguing South Africa's schools.

In 2012, the CJCP embarked on the second sweep of its school violence study, this time focusing solely on secondary schools. The aim was to identify any changes or patterns in the levels of violence affecting schools nationwide.

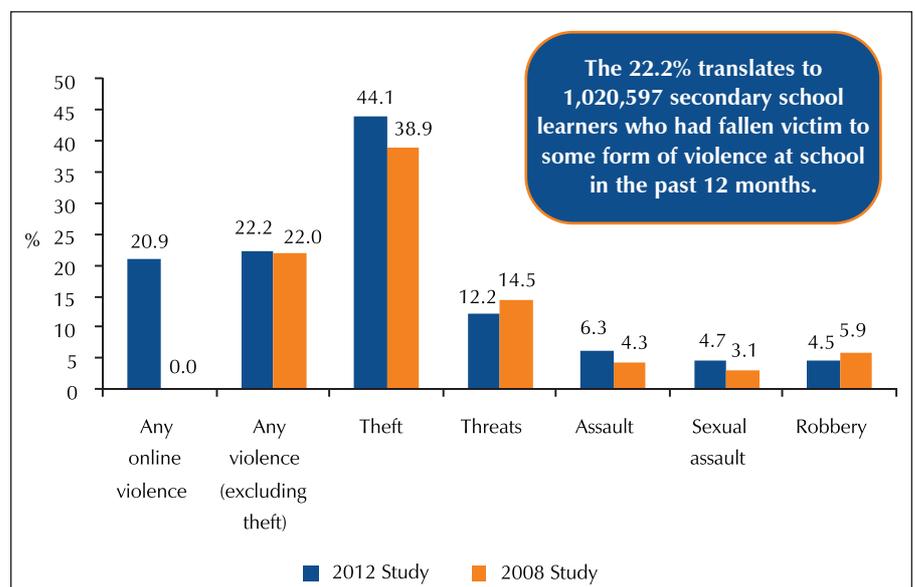
Overall, the results emerging from this follow-up study revealed that not much has changed over the past four years, and young people continue to

be at risk for violence in an environment that is assumed to be safe.

A primarily quantitative approach was employed to collect the study data. The sample of secondary schools was stratified by province and was drawn proportionate to size. The Department of Basic Education's EMIS system 2012 constituted the sampling frame, from which a total of 121 schools were randomly selected. A sample of 5,939 learners, 121 principals and 239 educators was achieved.

Four specific types of violence were explored in the study – namely, threats of violence, assault, sexual assault (including rape) and robbery that occurred either within the school grounds or immediately outside the school gates. In addition to these criminal forms of violence, data was collected on other forms of victimisation that affect learners, including theft of personal belongings and violence perpetrated through various forms of information and communication technologies (ICTs) (i.e. cyber violence).

Figure 1: Experiences of violence at school (%)



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Violence is widespread in South African schools. One in five secondary school learners – a total of 22.2% – had experienced any violence while at school in the 12 months between August 2011 and August 2012. This translates to just over a million learners (1,020,597) across the country. In 2008, an overall victimisation rate of 22% was obtained. This suggests that levels of school violence have remained relatively constant over the past four years. See Figure 1 (previous page).

Threats of violence were frequent occurrences at school and constituted the most common form of violence experienced by learners. One in ten (12.2%) learners had been threatened with violence by someone at school. This figure was down from the 14.5% observed in 2008.

Although not actual incidents that may result in physical injuries, threats are just as important since the psychological harm and fear associated with it is substantial and may impact negatively on the schooling experience, preventing quality learning from taking place.

A physical assault was reported by one in 16 participants (6.3%). This percentage was up by 2% from the 4.3% observed in 2008. This amounts to a total of 289,629 high school learners across the country

that had been assaulted in the past year, at a rate of 63 per 1,000 learners. The term assault was used to refer to incidents where learners may have been attacked or hurt by someone physically, using any kind of weapon or their hands.

Close to one in 20 learners (4.7%) had been sexually assaulted or raped at school. For the purpose of this study, the term sexual violence was used to refer to any unwanted sexual contact, regardless of whether penetration occurs or not. The definition therefore incorporated both sexual assault and rape.

The 2012 percentage observed was higher than the 3.1% noted in 2008. Any statistics on sexual violence should always be interpreted cautiously given the tendency to underreport this violation. The figure extrapolates to 216,072 learners who had succumbed to sexual violence on school premises in the past year, at a rate of 46.9 learners per 1,000.

Robbery was reported by just less than one in 20 learners. The crime of robbery combines theft with the use or threat of violence. When comparing the 2012 (4.5%) and 2008 (5.9%) figures, the data shows a decline in robbery rates over the past four years. Even so, 206,878 high school learners across the country reportedly had their property taken from them by force while being at

school, at a rate of 45 per 1,000 learners. Learners were typically robbed of money, school stationery and electronic items such as cellular phones, iPods or MP3 players, and even at times food and clothing items.

Online violence, or cyber bullying, was reported by 20.9% of young people. Cyber bullying refers to any form of harm or abuse of power or force, either threatened or actual, that is inflicted repeatedly and intentionally against another individual through the use of ICTs. The figure suggests that although the extent of this violence is serious enough to warrant attention, contrary to popular belief it is still less prevalent than traditional or physical forms of violence affecting youth.

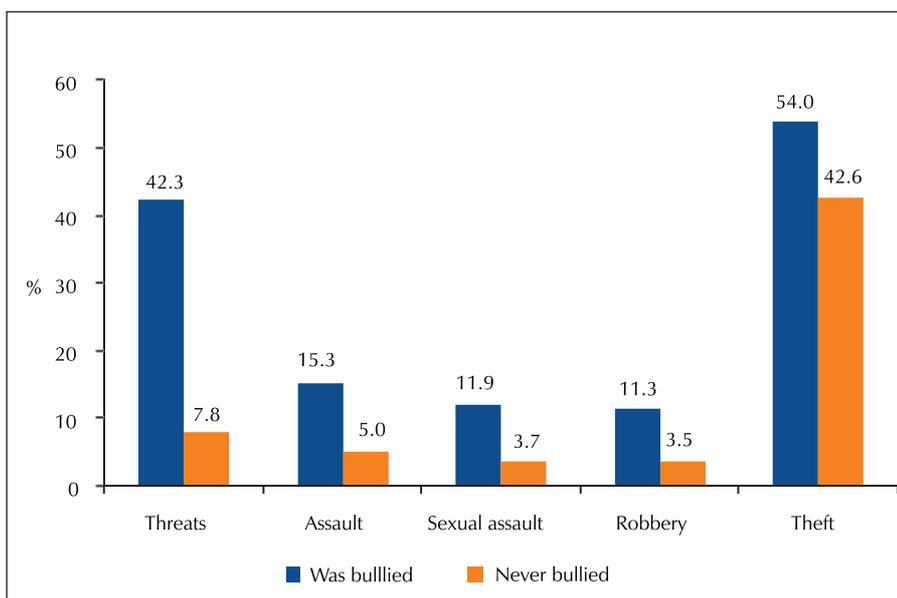
An experience of theft was recounted by 44.1% of learners, constituting the most frequently reported crime among secondary school learners (including both violent and non-violent crimes). This was in keeping with the 2008 results. The 2012 figure amounts to a total of 2,027,403 learners who had their personal belongings stolen while at school, at a rate of 441 per 1,000 learners. This percentage was up by 5.2% from the 38.9% in 2008.

There were no significant differences between male and female learners and their risk for threats, robberies or assaults at school. Nevertheless, males did experience slightly higher rates of robbery and assault while females reported slightly higher levels of threats at school.

A significant difference was, however, observed between male and female learners and their likelihood of being sexually assaulted or raped at school. Female learners (7.6%) were found to experience this violation at rates substantially higher than their male counterparts (1.4%).

Violent incidents occurring at schools were often not isolated, one-off incidents. A great number of learners were re-victimised following their first encounter with threats, robberies, assaults or sexual assaults. Not only did many learners succumb to the same crime on multiple occasions, many also fell victim to different types of violence. Of the fifth

Figure 2: Effect of bullying on violence (%)



of learners who had reported an experience of violence at school in the year prior to the study, 4.5% had been exposed to two or more types of violence within the school environment in the past year alone.

Bullying, specifically, was found to create vulnerability to other forms of violence at school, even in the case of property-related crimes. The data depicted in Figure 2 clearly shows that victims of bullying at school were significantly more likely than those who were not bullied at school to be victimised in other ways, including being threatened, assaulted, sexually assaulted and robbed.

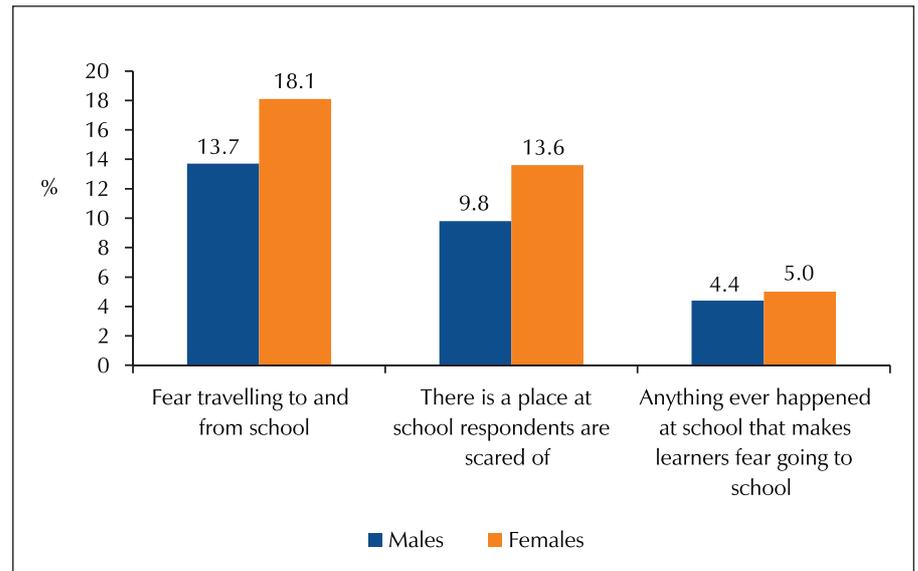
This highlights the importance of addressing bullying in the school grounds as a key area for any intervention strategy aimed at reducing the levels of violence occurring at schools.

Classrooms were the most common sites for violence at school and were identified as the place where victimisation occurred in nine out of ten thefts (91.5%), three out of five (60.2%) robberies, one out of two assaults (51%) and sexual assaults (54.2%), and two out of five cases where learners were threatened with violence (44.3%). This finding was in keeping with the 2008 study.

It is assumed that classrooms are safe spaces for learners since these areas are constantly supervised. The data suggests, however, that educators are often absent, leaving classrooms unsupervised and learners at risk of violence. If present, educators in many instances are unable to manage the classrooms effectively. This may explain, in part, the continued use of corporal punishment to correct learner behaviour.

A total of 49.8% of learners reported being physically hit, caned or spanked by educators or principals for their wrongdoings. This percentage was slightly higher than the figure observed in 2008 (47.5%), indicating that little progress has been made in reducing the reliance on physical punishment as a means of effecting discipline at schools. Other areas where violence took place included playing fields or

Figure 3: Feelings of fear by gender (%)



sports areas, toilets and other open grounds at the school.

The aggressors in the violence experienced at school were typically known to the victims and tended to be other pupils at the school. Classmates or other learners at the school were implicated as perpetrators in approximately nine out of ten threats, sexual assaults and robberies reported. One in seven (69.8%) assaults was perpetrated by fellow learners.

Feelings of fear were commonly associated with the schooling experience. Not only did learners experience fear while travelling to and from school (16.1%), but 11.9% also stated that there were areas at their school where they were usually afraid. These areas tended to be toilets (53.9%), other open grounds or spaces (14.8%) and playing fields or sports areas (12.7%). Schools maintained that they were often unable to control what happens in these areas due to a shortage of staff to sufficiently monitor the spaces. Fear was higher among female learners compared to males. Levels of fear in 2012 were slightly higher than those observed in 2008.

Despite the levels of victimisation at school, the majority of learners claimed to feel safe at school. While 79% of the learners claimed to feel safe at school all the time, one in six learners (16%) claimed to feel safe only sometimes at school. This may be indicative of the extent to which crime and violence

have become normalised in South African societies, with the resultant desensitisation to this scenario.

It was encouraging to find fairly high levels of reporting among learners. This is important since effective responses to school violence are dependent on incidents of violence being brought to the attention of the relevant school authorities. Seven out of ten (70.2%) robberies, two out of three (68.1%) threats, three out of five (61.7%) sexual assaults and nearly six out of ten (57.3%) assaults were reported to educators, friends or parents.

There were slight variations in reporting rates when compared to the 2008 data. Reporting of threats of violence (63%) and sexual assaults (55.7%) had increased since 2008. Learners were, however, less inclined to report the assaults (64.8%) and robberies (76.8%) levelled against them at school.

While educators were identified as the individuals who learners were most inclined to report school violence to, the findings showed a greater tendency to inform friends rather than parents about violence encountered at school.

This highlights the important role that peers can play in school violence prevention. Even with these high reporting rates, a great number of violent acts perpetrated against learners go unreported at schools.

The accessibility of alcohol and drugs within the school environment has been found to influence the levels of violence within schools. The learners participating in the 2012 NSVS demonstrated an acute awareness of people at their schools who were involved in various substance-related activities, ranging from using drugs (47.1% knew people who smoked marijuana; 12.2% knew people who used illicit drugs), to buying (12.7%) or selling drugs (6.3%). Furthermore, one in seven (15.5%) reported knowing people at school who had done things that could have gotten them in trouble with the police, such as stealing, selling stolen goods or assaulting others.

This suggests that **young people's exposure to would-be offenders or individuals involved in anti-social activities is significantly enhanced within the school environment.** This increased their susceptibility to violence.

Schools are microcosms of the broader communities in which they are located. Several community-level risk factors were found to increase susceptibility to violence within the school environment, including exposure to neighbourhood adults

involved in criminal or violent behaviour, alcohol, drug and weapon availability, and exposure to crime and violence. This facilitated the bringing of alcohol, drugs and weapons into the school environment.

A number of features associated with family life were also found to increase vulnerability to violence outside of the home. Parental criminality (9.4%), sibling criminality (23.7%), exposure to family violence as witnesses (12.2%) as well as direct experiences of violence within the home were found to increase the risk for assaults, threats, robberies and sexual assaults outside of the home, i.e. at school.

Violence perpetrated against young people is likely to result in a range of emotional, behavioural and educational outcomes that occur across the lifespan and which impact negatively on children's healthy developmental trajectories.

The study provides evidence to suggest that children and youth who are subjected to violence are at increased likelihood of experiencing depression, social isolation and loneliness, anxiety and apprehension. Consequences directly relating to educational outcomes include a

noticeable decline in academic performance, a lack of interest in school and lowered concentration.

Overall, the study results show that the safety and security of learners and schools is unavoidably linked to the community in which the school is located. The data shows that by the time young people enter secondary school, many of them had already been exposed to some form of violence, either as witnesses or victims in their homes or neighbourhoods.

Thus, **while there are many features specific to the school environment that fuel the risk for violence, any intervention strategy hoping to stem the tide of violence in schools needs to extend beyond the school itself** and should address all the components that constitute the school community – that is, learners, educators, principals, parents, school management teams as well as broader communities.

Such a carefully targeted and coherent system of interventions should be evidence based rather than implemented intuitively or instinctually. This will ensure that schools become places of safety, rather than being places that put youths at risk for violence.

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