

Snapshot results of the CJCP National Schools Violence Study

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Previous studies of crimes against young people show schools as the site where children are at greatest risk of experiencing a range of crimes, including violent crimes such as assault and sexual assault.¹ The National Schools Violence Study (NSVS) attempted to unpack these findings further, collecting data on violence experienced by learners specifically within the school environment.

The study focused on four primary forms of violence, namely: threats of violence; physical assaults; sexual violence; and robbery. Theft at school was included as a marker variable. In addition, primary school learners were asked about verbal stigmatisation and whether they had been shouted at or made to feel ashamed by their peers, educators or principals. All of these were incidents that occurred specifically within the environs of the school or immediately outside the school gates.

Learners at both primary and secondary schools in South Africa are

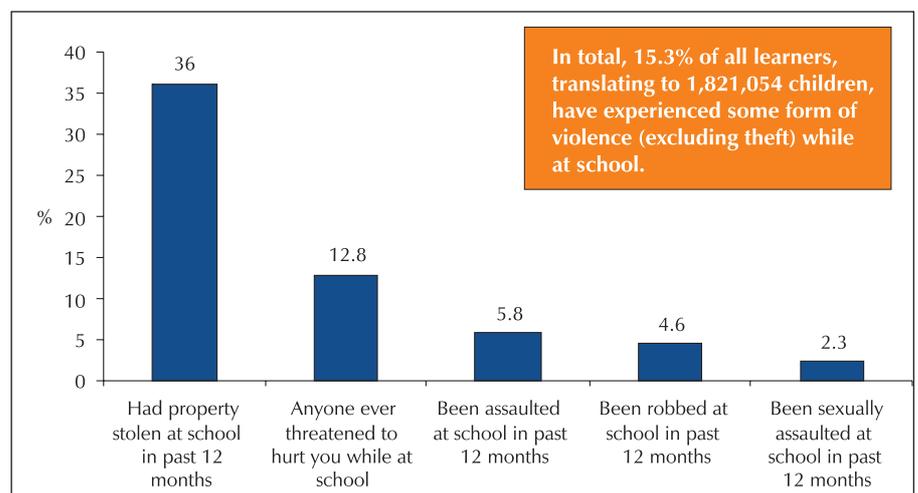
significantly at risk of falling victim to some form of violence while at school. **In total, 15.3% of all learners between grades three and 12 had experienced some form of violence while at school. This translates to 1,821,054 school learners throughout the country.**

Threats of violence are common in both primary and secondary schools. In total, more than one in ten (12.8%) learners reported having been threatened with violence, with 10.8% of primary and 14.5% of secondary school learners reporting

this experience. While not necessarily resulting in physical injuries, threats can be as detrimental to children as actual violence and are likely to result in fear of school and of their classmates, the inability to concentrate on learning, as well as a decrease in trust and in positive social and interaction experiences with peers or adults.

One in 20 learners (5.8%) reported experiencing incidents of physical assaults at school. This translates to 690,334 learners in primary and secondary schools who have been

Experiences of violence at school (primary and secondary learners)



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In real terms, South African learners are victimised at a rate of 160 learners per 1,000. This rate is significantly higher than, for example, the United States, where the latest data yields a rate of 57 learners per 1,000 falling prey to comparative forms of violence at school. South Africa does, however, fare somewhat better than many Brazilian cities. While rates for Brazil are not available, a recent city study found that 45% of learners had been robbed at school.

Incidents of sexual violence are by their nature under-reported in, for example, victim surveys. While any numbers depicted should thus be treated with caution, the fact that 2.3% of learners say they have been victims of sexual violence is cause for concern. This translates to more than 27,000 learners who have experienced some form of sexual assault or rape at school.

At primary schools, boys (2.5%) are more likely than girls (0.2%) to report having experienced sexual violence, while at secondary schools girls (4.8%) are three times as likely as boys (1.4%) to have been sexually assaulted or raped.

been assaulted, three out of ten secondary school robbery victims, and one-third of sexual violence victims at secondary schools reported that they had had these experiences three times or more.

In all forms of violence, with the exception of primary school learners' experiences of assault, the most common perpetrators of this violence are fellow classmates and peers. In the case of assaults, primary school learners were more likely to report that educators had inflicted the harm on them. This potentially relates to the issue of corporal punishment.

Despite effectively constituting a crime of assault, **seven out of ten primary school learners, and almost half of secondary school learners reported that they were physically beaten, spanked or caned when they had done something wrong at school.**

Despite the prevalence of violence reported above, nine out of ten (90.6%) learners reported that they felt safe at school. This reinforces previous arguments made by the CJCP that violence has become normalised for young people – it is part of everyday life for learners.

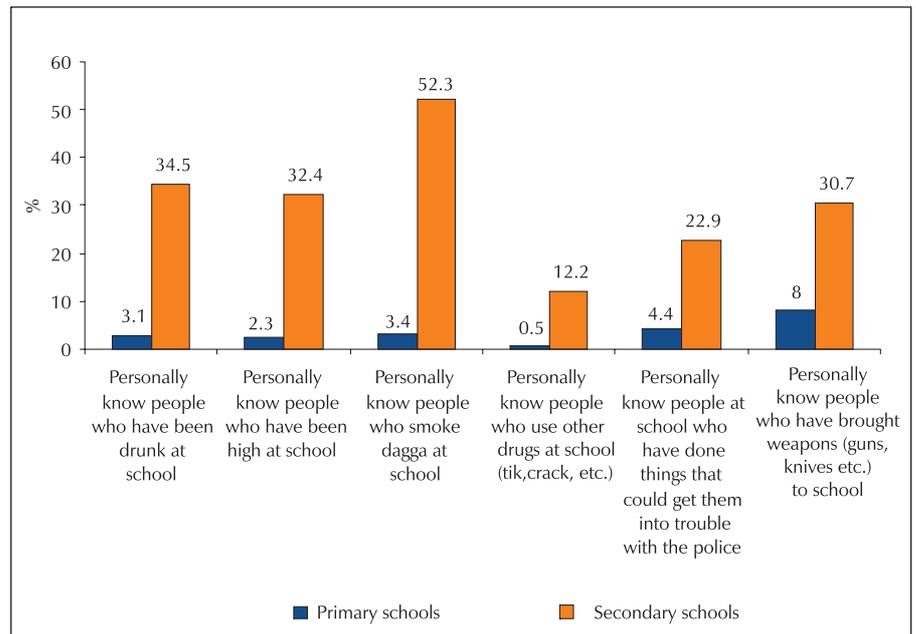
assaulted while at school. Cases of assault, which could include physical bullying, were more common at primary schools (7.5%) than secondary schools, where 4.3% of learners were likely to report such cases. These assaults could be relatively minor, but could also include incidents entailing the use of weapons. At secondary schools, males are almost three times as likely as females to be assaulted.

Classrooms, toilets and open grounds are the sites at schools where these experiences of violence are most likely to occur. The fact that the classroom was identified by learners as the most common site for threats, assaults, robberies and sexual violence suggests that classrooms are frequently left unattended, and learners are particularly vulnerable when unsupervised. Of particular concern is that incidents of violence are not isolated for individual learners. Three out of five primary school learners who had

Robberies were also relatively common at schools, with just less than one in 20 learners reporting having been robbed. Robbery is by definition a violent crime, with property being taken through the use, or threat, of violence. Robberies are more common at secondary schools than primary schools, with 5.9% of secondary school learners as opposed to 3.1% of primary school learners experiencing robberies while at school.

While there is no significant difference in the likelihood of girls or boys being assaulted or threatened with assault, females at primary schools (4.5%) are more likely than males (1.8%) to be robbed, while **at secondary schools, males (8%) are twice as likely as females (3.8%) to be robbed.**

Alcohol, drugs and weapons at schools



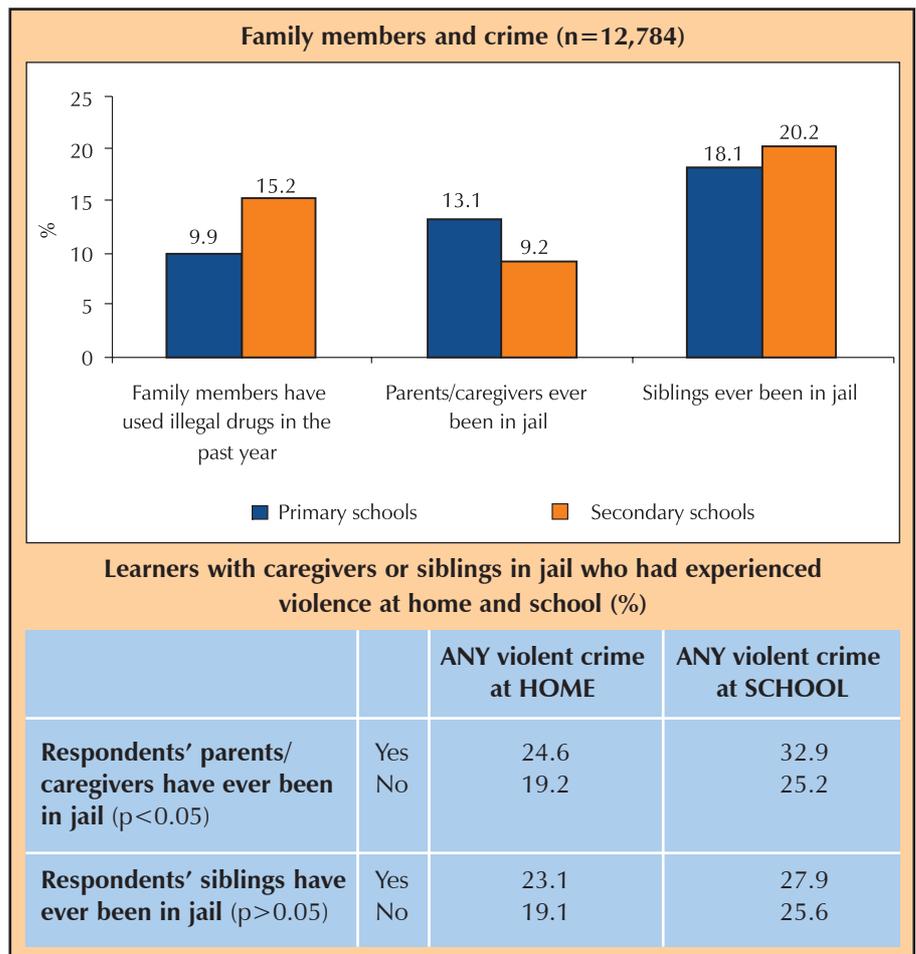
Primary school learners (96.3%) are more likely than secondary school learners (85.5%) to feel safe at school.

Learners are more likely to fear the actual trip to or from school, with more than one in ten (14.3%) fearing the trip. One-tenth (10.7%) also reported that there was a particular place at school where they felt unsafe, most commonly the toilets, open grounds or playing fields, and classrooms.

Reporting of violence at school by learners is significantly higher than reporting levels of crime among children and youth generally, as reported in the CJCP Youth Victimization Survey.² Between 45.5% of learners in the case of primary school victims of assault, and 82.3% of primary school robbery victims, reported the incident to some person in authority. With the exception of assault, reporting rates were between 4% and 20% higher among secondary school learners than primary school learners.

Both alcohol and drugs are relatively accessible to learners of all ages, although more so to older learners. **In total more than one in ten (14.7%) secondary school learners and slightly fewer (10.5%) primary school learners reported that it was easy to get alcohol at school, and similar percentages thought it was easy to get dagga** (10.1% primary and 11% secondary school learners). Of real concern is that three in ten secondary school learners (31.2%) reported that it was easy to get a knife at school, and more than one-tenth (12.8%) of primary school learners thought it would be easy to get a knife. A significantly smaller percentage of older learners (7.5%) thought it was easy to get a gun at school, while almost one in ten primary school learners thought it easy to get a gun.

The study showed the strong linkages



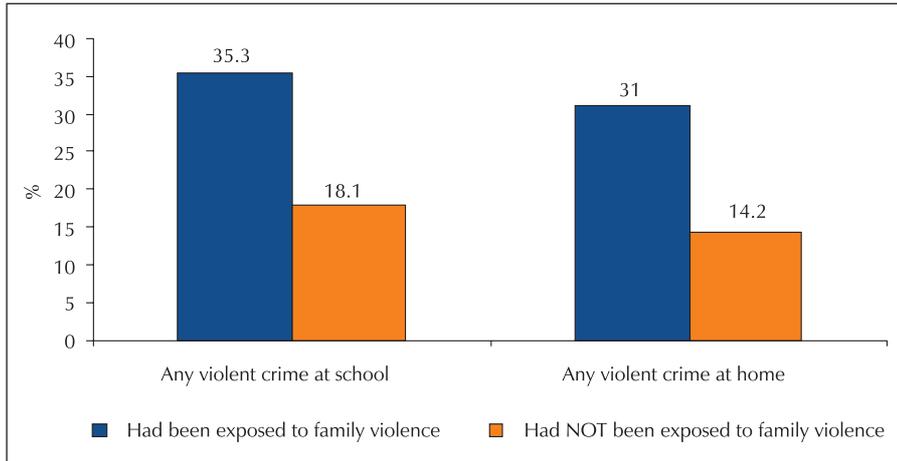
between experiences at school and the environment to which learners are exposed outside of school. Rates of (violent) victimisation among both primary and secondary school learners in their homes and communities were high, with children exposed on a daily basis to various forms of violence, anti-social behaviour and illegal activities. One-tenth of primary school learners (9.9%), and an even higher percentage of secondary school learners (15.2%) reported that family members had used illegal drugs in the past year.

Approximately one-tenth (13.1% primary, 9.2% secondary) of learners have caregivers or parents who have been in jail, while almost one in five (18.1% primary, 20.2% secondary) learners have siblings who are or have been in jail. Each of these factors significantly increases the risk of victimisation at school (see table above). These factors are also in themselves significant predictors of anti-social or delinquent behaviour.³ Experiences of violence in the

community and at home were also common, with one in two primary school learners and two in three secondary school learners having seen someone intentionally hurting another in their community, and slightly more than one in ten learners having seen family members intentionally hurting another family member (other than the learner). In many of these instances weapons were used, and the degree of injury was such that medical treatment was required. These incidents thus do not suggest minor scuffles, but rather attacks with intent to inflict serious harm and injury.

A strong correlation exists between those learners who had experienced violence at home and had been exposed to violence in their community, and those who had been victims of violence at school. This suggests that exposure to and experiences of violence outside of school is significantly likely to increase the chance of experiencing violence

Exposure to and experience of family violence, in relation to experience of violence at school



when at school. In total one-tenth (9.6%) of primary school learners and slightly fewer (7.3%) secondary school learners had been victims of assault at home, while similar percentages (9.8% of secondary school learners and 5.3% of primary school learners) had been robbed at home.

Those learners who had been exposed to some form of family violence were twice as likely to be victims of violence at school (35.3%) and at home (31%) than those who had not been exposed to family violence (18.1% and 14.2% respectively).

These findings point to the importance of a multi-sectoral approach to dealing with school violence. The Department of Education (DoE) has to assume responsibility for situational crime prevention – that is, making schools safer environments by minimising access to weapons and drugs, as well as by equipping school management with the tools to identify and manage incidents of violence. Similarly, schools need to be made accountable for the incidents of violence. Educators also need to be equipped with better classroom management

skills, particularly as classrooms are such common sites of violence. However, these steps deal primarily with the effect rather than with the causes of violence.

The NSVS shows that the primary drivers of violence within schools are firmly rooted in the generally violent environments in which children live outside of school. While this does not negate the role of the DoE in keeping schools safe, it does point to the need for a much more fundamental, coherent series of interventions that target parents, homes and communities in general.

Schools can serve as a focal point for communities. Safe schools can serve as important mechanisms for mediating wider exposure to violence and for decreasing levels of strain that often lead to violence and anti-social behaviour among children and youth. Safe schools can also go some way towards developing pro-social behaviour and a positive affective state among children.⁴

Integrated interventions from the South African Police Service (SAPS), the Department of Social Development, Department of Community

Safety and local government need to address the generally high levels of violence that persist. Equally important, they should provide targeted support to single parents, as well as providing general positive parenting skills to potential and existing parents and to families living in depressed socio-economic environments (particularly households subject to overcrowding). The DoE and other departments also need to focus on the intensified implementation of appropriate early childhood development programmes.

Local government, together with the SAPS, should work on making the environments around schools safe through environmental design and maintenance, as well as through the creation of alcohol- and drug-free zones. Provincial liquor licensing boards need to assume responsibility for not issuing licences to outlet operators within a specified radius of schools. There is also need for the development and monitoring of key long-term child safety indicators, including the levels of violence within schools, as well as for further rigorous, empirical and local research on violence within schools.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Leoschut L & Burton P, *How Rich the Rewards: Results of the 2005 National Youth Victimization Study*, CJCP monograph 1, Cape Town, 2006.
- 2 Leoschut & Burton, op cit.
- 3 Farrington DP & Welsh BC, *Saving Children from a Life of Crime: Early Risk Factors and Effective Interventions*, Oxford University Press, London, 2007; Burton P & Leoschut L, *Hanging on with Fingertips*, CJCP monograph 5, Cape Town, forthcoming.
- 4 Lee DR & Cohen JW, Examining strain in a school context, in *Youth Violence and Juvenile Justice* 6, 2008, pp 115-134; Gottfredson DG, *School and Delinquency*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 2001.



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