



A CUP OF HEALTH WITH CDC

Keeping Schools Safe from Violence

School-Associated Student Homicides — United States, 1992–2006

Recorded: January 22, 2008; posted: January 24, 2008

[Announcer] This podcast is presented by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. CDC – safer, healthier people.

[Matthew Reynolds] Welcome to *A Cup of Health with CDC*, a weekly broadcast of the MMWR, the Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report. I'm your host, Matthew Reynolds.

Homicide is the second leading cause of death among 5 to 18 year olds in the U.S. Widespread media coverage of school homicides, such as Columbine, can give the impression that such tragedies are common and schools are unsafe. But what's reality? CDC researchers recently worked with education experts to review school-associated homicides for answers. Dr. Jeffrey Hall, a researcher with CDC's Violence Prevention Program, is here to discuss the findings. Welcome to the show, Dr. Hall.

[Dr. Hall] Good morning.

[Matthew Reynolds] Dr. Hall, what kind of schools did this study review and what years are we talking about?

[Dr. Hall] This study included elementary, middle, and high schools, and it covered years from 1992 through 2006.

[Matthew Reynolds] So are we talking about just public schools here?

[Dr. Hall] We're talking about both public and private schools.

[Matthew Reynolds] How common are school-associated homicides among youth?

[Dr. Hall] Less than one percent of all homicides among school-age children are school-associated. In other words, the majority of homicides among kids who are school-age occur outside of school properties.

[Matthew Reynolds] Dramatic events, like the killings at Columbine, get a lot of media coverage and give the appearance that every school is vulnerable to similar tragedies. What did your study find?

[Dr. Hall] Well, primarily our study found that, despite the occurrence of high-profile events, such as Columbine, schools remain relatively safe places.

[Matthew Reynolds] If I'm a parent listening to your answer, I'm wondering what the term 'relatively safe' means. Could you give that some more context?

[Dr. Hall] Well, this particular study didn't focus on non-fatal forms of violence and we do know that things, such as bullying, do tend to characterize a school environment. Therefore, we can't officially say that schools are completely safe.

[Matthew Reynolds] What's responsible for these homicides?

[Dr. Hall] One of the things that we did as a part of this study was to characterize trends in homicide rates. One of the things that we weren't able to actually talk about with this particular study were some of the factors that actually contribute to the homicides that we are seeing occurring on school properties. That will actually be dealt with in a study that will provide a little bit more detail about this particular topic.

[Matthew Reynolds] You mentioned trends in homicides in schools. What kind of trends are you seeing?

[Dr. Hall] Well basically, what we focus on are single-victim events, multiple-victim events, and the total of those two types of events, and what we're actually seeing is that, on the whole, there's been a decrease in total homicide rates among students, and there's also been a decrease in rates that involve single victims.

[Matthew Reynolds] So you're saying overall, you're seeing a decrease in homicides. So if you're watching T.V., if you're seeing stories about school-related homicides, it's important to keep that in perspective, that overall, the numbers are going down. Is that fair?

[Dr. Hall] That's fair to say.

[Matthew Reynolds] What are the signs that parents or teachers should watch for in order to prevent a disagreement from escalating among students into one of these homicides?

[Dr. Hall] Well, one of the things that we emphasize is the need to always have open channels of communication, and we actually encourage the cultivation of an environment where students and peers are able to actively talk to parents, staff members, anyone in that environment that might provide another avenue of expressing the anger or the angst that they might feel at the time.

[Matthew Reynolds] What do you recommend to reduce violence among students in schools?

[Dr. Hall] There have been a number of measures that have been shown to be effective in reducing the occurrence of violence in school settings. For example, measures commonly implemented include those to reduce crowding in hallways; they have had the impact of causing reductions in violence. Also, many schools have implemented measures, such as increasing the monitoring of students as they change classes to decrease the likelihood of arguments that might result in violence. And finally, one thing that we do suggest that may be of use in cases where there's a potential for fatal violence is related to threat reporting,

and that basically consists of taking serious any threat that is reported, regardless of the source of that particular information.

[Matthew Reynolds] We've been talking about school-related homicides. Are we talking about homicides that are happening within the school walls or are these happening outside the school walls or both?

[Dr. Hall] We're actually talking about both. Our definition that we used in the study includes those deaths that occur on school properties, as well as deaths that occur on the way to or from school or on the way to or from school-associated events.

[Matthew Reynolds] Since school-associated homicides are not very common, should schools and communities offer programs to prevent youth violence?

[Dr. Hall] Yes, they should, and one thing that we actually do is advocate the use of what are referred to as comprehensive violence prevention measures. And what these comprehensive measures actually target are a range of aggressive behaviors by addressing risk factors at the individual, family, and community levels in a range of locales.

[Matthew Reynolds] Could you give me an example?

[Dr. Hall] Well, there are a lot of examples out there, but the CDC currently sponsors what are known as National Academic Centers of Excellence or our ACES, and what these particular Centers are designed to do is to work with the community and to provide a comprehensive approach to dealing with violence. So, for example, they use measures that have been shown to be effective inside of the school, as well as engaging in behaviors that will address violence in the home, for example, or violence in the larger community, and in so doing, they hope to have a larger, global impact upon the occurrence of violence, as a whole, not just violence related to the conditions inside of the schools themselves.

[Matthew Reynolds] Where can our listeners get more information about youth violence and the kind of programs you've mentioned that help prevent it?

[Dr. Hall] O.K., simply go to www.cdc.gov and in the search bar, input "youth violence."

[Matthew Reynolds] Well Dr. Hall, thanks for sharing this information with us today.

[Dr. Hall] You're welcome.

[Matthew Reynolds] Well, that's it for this week's show. Don't forget to join us next week. Until then, be well. This is Matthew Reynolds for *A Cup of Health with CDC*.

[Announcer] To access the most accurate and relevant health information that affects you, your family and your community, please visit www.cdc.gov.