## School Safety Analysis in Middle School

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The safety of the school environment has long been linked to positive academic achievement and the overall wellbeing of the students, teachers, volunteers, and administrators who report to a school campus daily. This evaluation report shows an analysis of data gathered and reviewed from a survey conducted in fall 2011 of 857 middle school students in the 8th grade. The future plan is to follow the trend in the data over the next few years as the efforts of the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program the school has implemented will continue to take effect. Also, we look at the trend in bullying when compared to ethnic groups within the school, and they are reported here.

At the start of the campaign, the middle school students stated that they felt overall ‘somewhat’ safe in their school environment. The purpose of the evaluation was to see how the efforts put forth by the newly implemented campaign have impacted the overall sense of safety in the school. Research over this short time of the beginning of the program has indicated that students are fearful of threatening behaviors that take place in areas where adults are less prevalent. After the evaluation, it was determined that a need for the continuation of this new program is essential to prevent school violence.

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Over the past years, our society as a whole has seen a dramatic increase in the amount of school violence and the negative impact it has on child development as a whole. With the increase of technology, we have seen an increase in the ways that students chose to show their violence towards their peers. The traditional routes of weapons, gangs, and bullying are still heavily available in schools, but with an increase in the severity of outcomes than in the past. Many middle schools are taking extra efforts in preventing school violence by ways of the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program and outlets for students’ to go for help.

This report, based on the three different types of surveys administered throughout a diverse 8th grade student body, explores variables related to violence and bullying, including: trends in threatening behaviors; students carrying guns and other weapons at school and outside of school; gang activity; and students’ perceptions of how often they feel safe in specific areas of their schools. We will compare these surveys taking and the beginning, middle, and end of this report period to see if any of the newly implemented efforts have made any changes to the initial reactions stated by students. We also looked into how students’ expressed themselves based on ethnicity, to see if the is any increase in bullying based upon ethnic discrimination.

### Program Background: School Violence in Relation to Academic Achievement

Anytime an act of violence occurs at a school, it merits a huge amount of attention. Depending on the severity, at times it can even involve the community and local media. This is not the type of attention that a school wants to receive; negative attention. It causes a sense of unrest in the community, amongst parents, and amongst the students who have to walk the halls each day. Anytime the talk of a teacher or student facing the potential of being hurt at school will cause the administration to take notice and follow the appropriate steps for prevention and safety. By implementing a safety prevention plan, teachers and administration can better prepare the hallways and individuals that walk them for any type of school violence that may impact their lives.

While it is impossible to completely predict when severely violent incidents may occur, steps can be followed to try and prevent them, and must be done for the safety and protection of everyone. Research has shown that even small incidents that happen will raise an atmosphere of fear that affects many students emotionally and academically. Studies have been conducted over the years, and in an article on a students’ ethnicity, Massey cited four studies and concluded “chronic exposure to violence adversely affects a child’s ability to learn.”

In another study, Heinrich et al found that a review of the literature suggested a negative association between violence exposure and academic achievement. Heinrich believes this relationship indicates that children who report more instances of witnessing and victimization by violence, whether in the school, home, or community, do not perform as well in school as their peers reporting fewer instances.

Different reports suggest that a probable cause for this relationship would be the family and home environments that these children are around and have grown accustomed to seeing as normal. Domestic and family violence play a part in the way students grow to express themselves and interact with others; if fighting is the ‘norm’ and home, then this view of violence as an appropriate behavior is sure to follow the student to school settings. These home situations can also breed an impending sense of fear in the children, as they have learned to always be wary of the violence they see. A report by Cole found that “when children live in a constant state of fear, the areas of their brains controlling the fear response can become overdeveloped ….It is important to note that the areas of the brain active in fearful states are different from those active in calm states, and it is predominantly the areas active in calm states that are required for academic learning.”A student worrying about being attacked in the hallways will not be functioning well at tasks required in the classroom. That student will always be living in a constant state of fear throughout every daily action.

Even children who are not directly affected by violence may still have to deal with its aftermath. Research indicates that “widespread concern about violence within a school may reduce the quality of teaching, disrupt classroom discipline, limit teachers’ availability to students before or after the school day, and reduce students’ motivation to attend school and/or willingness to participate in extracurricular activities.” Teachers work hard to make their learning environment one of safety and productivity. When there is disruption in the hallways, especially the threat of violence in any form, then the focus of the teacher has strayed from the more important job of academics to that of a state of fear to prevent what may or may not be happening. Here we must implement the focus of our evaluation to answer the following questions:

1. Is there a current plan of school violence prevention?

2. Do students feel safe in their school environment?

3. Is the current violence prevention plan being implemented with success?

4. What are the main areas of concern in this school that deals with school violence?

5. Is there another program or plan that can be developed to increase the confidence of students and teachers and in turn decrease the main areas of concern that deal with school violence?

In any discussion of academic achievement, administrators, educators, and parents should be aware of the need to improve students’ confidence in the safety of their school environment. This study of the view of safety and violence, especially bullying, in schools will be used to aid policy makers in making decisions that help improve school safety, reduce bullying, and in turn, improve the overall learning environment.

#### METHODS USED FOR THE SURVEYS

##### Main Examples of Violence Seen on Middle School Campuses

While several federal agencies have identified what they view as the major threats on school campuses, it is agreed across the board that there is no good way to asses the measure of violent and threatening behavior that takes place amongst the students.

During the past decade, the state of Alabama has issued the Pride Surveys in many middle and high schools to asses the viewpoints of students on issues that deal with school violence and safety. By using such surveys, along with assessments and observations conducted by school personnel, parents, and school resource officers, our middle school has broken down the behaviors of concern for our school into the following categories based upon our schools frequencies of occurrence of them. These that we have chosen to focus on are seemingly similar categories among every middle and high school around, so we feel our findings in this report will be beneficial to a wide range of audience. The categories we have are:

* Gang participation/gang membership;
* Students carrying weapons – making weapons at school;
* Threatening behavior toward other students (bullying);

##### Study Population

The population of this study ultimately will be our entire student body, grades 6-8. For the purpose of this report, we began with our 8th grade students. In all, 857 students of all ethnic, academic, and gender types were questioned, and views heard in the fall of 2011. Of the participating students, 69% self-identified as White, 26% as Black, and 5% as Hispanic/Asian/Other (Appendix 1).

##### Questionnaire and Data Analysis

The initial questionnaire given was a series of 228 questions, based off of Alabama’s Pride survey’s administered by the school counselors. These surveys were meant to elicit a student’s self-report of alcohol, tobacco, and other drug use and other key behaviors and environmental factors important to a child’s lifestyle choices and academic performance. The instrument, validity, data analysis and administrative details of the Pride Questionnaire are described through extensive research and development, which is why we used it as a pre-survey before implementing the new program. We felt this would give us a good idea of the foundations of what we are working with in our school and with our students.

#### TOP THREE AREAS OF VIOLENCE CONCERN

**1. Gang Participation/Gang Membership**

To assess frequency of gang membership or participation in gang activities, the Pride Questionnaire administered asks: “Do you take part in gang activities?” Students may answer: never, seldom, sometimes, often, or a lot. To determine gang activity level, all those responding seldom, sometimes, often, or a lot were combined into one group. For the purpose of this report, the term “gang member” is used for students who fall into this group of responders. Gang members, wither by truth or reputation, are of concern by teachers and administration because of their history of having a link to behaviors related to drug use, bullying, and violence.

The results of the survey gave light to the following information that gives us a good starting point on where to begin with our new program for school safety. Though our main focus is that of bullying, we also want to address any areas of concern that we can. Of the surveys that were answered with a definitive answer:

* 19% of gang members said that they sold drugs at school vs 28% of the students who said they were not in a gang;
* 2% of gang members said that they had threatened to harm a teacher, while 1% of non-gang members reported doing so;
* 10% of gang members said that they had hurt another student using a gun, knife, club, or other weapon (fists included) vs 29% of students reporting no gang activity.

In our survey, the White students ethnic group were shown to be the least likely to say they had participated in gang activities, while Black students were most likely to participate. Regardless of ethnicity, gang activities appear to be a low occurring problem in our middle school. (Figure 1.1)

**Figure 1.1 – Our school’s students: Big Three Concerns participation, by ethnicity**

**2. Carrying Weapons**

When asked about carrying weapons to school, students answered whether they had ever carried a gun/weapon to school and if they had carried a gun/weapon outside of school “as protection or as a weapon.” The second question is asked to eliminate students who use guns outside of school for recreational purposes (e.g. hunting).

###### Weapons at school

Being a middle school in the southern region of the country, we have a statistically different percentage of students who are exposed on a regular basis to guns and other weapons. Recreational purposes are what drive up our percentages in the guns/weapons use category, so on the surveys we made certain to specify we wanted to see the numbers of weapons carriers beyond recreational purpose; for the purpose of harm. Through the survey, we saw that of our students, more than 33% stated they have carried a weapon to school, and of that percent, 18% admitted to have used an illegal drug in the past month. When cross comparing questions, we also noticed that for bullying, physically (fighting), 80% of weapons-carrying students said they had hit, slapped, or kicked another student, while among the group of students who had never carried a weapon to school, only 34% say they had hit, slapped, or kicked another student. This proves to show how, many times, the major categories intertwine amongst behaviors. The purpose of this new program is to hopefully, provide healing and support in one area that will in turn impact the other areas in a positive way.

White students were found to be the most likely to report carrying a weapon to school, while Hispanic/Asian/Other students were least likely to report doing so. However, due to the greater number of White students, more weapons were with White students than with Hispanic students in schools. But both were still larger numbers than expected. (Figure 1.1)

***Weapons outside of school***

As previously stated, a child’s home environment plays a role in how that child is raised and what actions he or she will recreate in their lives. Homicides, drive-by shootings, gun accidents, and stabbings occur more frequently in the community at-large than at schools. The US Surgeon General put together a report on youth violence in 1999, as an answer to the Columbine High School tragedy that occurred in Colorado in April 1999, resulting in the deaths of 14 students, including 2 perpetrators, and a teacher. In the aftermath of that shocking event that forever changed the views on violence in our schools, both the administration and Congress requested a report summarizing what research has revealed to us about youth violence, its causes, and its prevention.

In Figure 1.2, we see how research reveals that the overall arrest rates for violent crimes by youths between the ages of 10 and 17 rose sharply from 1983 to 1993/1994. Rates then declined until 1999, the most recent year for which figures are available at the time of this report printing.

(Figure 1.2)



In our survey results, we saw that with our students, they are far more likely to carry guns/weapons outside of school overall. The majority is for recreational purposes, but the few who do carry weapons for protection state that it is outside of school that they do this, as the threat they have is more of the neighboring environment where they live, not the school hallways.

Nevertheless, an atmosphere of violence that prompts a student to carry a weapon takes its toll emotionally and academically. If a child has to live in the constant fear of self protection, then they are emotionally distraught and under extreme amongst of duress, as they are daily fighting for their life’s wellbeing. This focus on survival has an extreme impact on them, academically, because their priorities are on survival, not academics. Many who are in these situations expressed high suicide thoughts in the surveys. After seeing this, as a school we feel that this area is one that we need to conduct more research in to get to the heart of all the factors of this stress/suicide correlation and prevention methods that can be taken here.

In our school, the percentages of Blacks and Hispanic/Asian/Other students increased to be more likely to report carrying a weapon outside school. White students were still overall the most likely to do so, yet this is impacted by the fact that White is the majority race in this grouping by several hundred.

**3. Threatening Behaviors/Bullying**

Our students were asked in the survey if they had ever threatened to hurt another student by hitting, slapping or kicking, and also if they had ever threatened another student with a gun, knife, or club. Both questions were combined to obtain the frequency of “threatening behaviors.”

In our school, and schools across the nation the rate of threatening behaviors/bullying is on the rise. However, students are straying away from the traditional bullying methods of brute power and force. Instead, they are going to technology and letting the cyber world inflict the pain for them. Before, you could threaten and that bullying stayed between the bully and the victim. Now, a child can post threats online that everyone has access to, so the victim stands to get ridiculed from all kids, not just the bully. At our school, the number of students who stated they were bullied on a regular basis was a shocking 51%. This means that over half of our 8th grade population faces some sort of bullying behavior, regularly. This information alone is what has prompted our school to begin the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program, as we feel kids should not be threatened inside what is meant to be a safe, learning environment for growth and enrichment. To have it known that one child can freely take that experience from another just because of threatening behavior is something we wish to have a zero tolerance for, and want to take additional steps to prevent and heal in our school.

Although some might say that violence, bullying, and threatening issues are not linked to drug and alcohol abuse, study data contradict this viewpoint. Of the students reporting that the have had “threatening” behaviors towards another student in the survey, 35% said that they had used marijuana (real and/or synthetic) in the past year and 53% reported using liquor, compared to the 11% and 19%, respective rates among “non-threatening” students.

In our population, Hispanic/Asian/Other students reported the lowest rates of threatening behaviors. At the same time, Black students showed a steady increase in reported rates over the course of these past two months. (Figure 1.1)

**Safety and Fear**

Over the past years, as a school we have seen a rise in the amount of school violence, particularly in the area of bullying. After identifying our top three concerns that our amount of school violence hinges on, we have focused on the most prominent concern: bullying. To address this, we have chosen to begin to implement the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program into our school to see if it makes any type of impact on the student body as a whole. As previously stated, we administered a survey similar to the Pride surveys administered by the State Department of Education of Alabama. The purpose was to see where the initial levels of safety and fear were held about the current prevention system. In the surveys administered during September 2011, students were also asked to rate their feeling of safety in various locations in their schools. For each location, students could answer that they felt safe never, seldom, sometimes, often, or a lot. The greatest number of students reported feeling safer in the classroom and hallways (Figure 1.3), while fewer students said they felt safe in the gym/locker room and bathroom areas. More adult supervision seems to help students feel safer, and greater amounts of problems are occurring in areas where there is little adult supervision.

Figures 1.3 illustrates the responses of the students who say how safe they feel in a given area of the school. As stated previously, the hallways have more adult supervision, thus are less likely to allow for any violent confrontations. According to this data, we can see that many of the problems happen in the bathroom/locker room areas where adults are not as prominent. These are areas we need to begin beefing up in security for the safety of our students. If left unattended, these students getting singled out in these areas are the same who are likely to be more at-risk for academic underachievement, depression and other emotional problems stemming from the incidences in these areas that make them fearful to go there.

In the past few years, much attention has been focused on violence and bullying on school buses. As a result, several programs have been put into place to help supervise students on the buses and reduce the bullying that may occur there. In the surveys, students noted they are feeling safer on the school bus compared to previous years.

***The Influence of Ethnicity***

Black students consistently reported feeling least safe in all school areas, followed by Hispanic students and White students. This finding seems to conflict with the students’ earlier answers. These students stated they are unafraid of their environment or of meeting any conflict, yet they state through other answers that they do not feel safe. I feel that a contributing factor to this feeling is that this is a predominately white school and community. This is not a hostile community or school towards any race or ethnicity, yet the feeling of difference still lingers in the minds of some students.

Overall, I don’t feel that ethnicity had a huge impact in the answering of the pre-surveys, but throughout the research, more data may surface that will see if ethnicity is related to the feeling of safety and fear amongst these students, their attitudes and perceptions of school as a whole. Across ethnic groups, the trend of more students never feeling safe in varying school locations held true; each group felt schools had not become safer in the past three years.

##### CONCLUSION

When the 8th grade students completed the questionnaire in September 2011, the data provided a snapshot of students’ attitudes and experiences about bullying, threatening behaviors, and violence in school. From this data, we are able to pinpoint three main areas of concern to aid us in providing as much school violence prevention as possible to ensure a safe learning environment for all students. The largest area of concern, after data was measured, was that of threatening behaviors, also called bullying. Therefore, we are taking a proactive approach and beginning to implement a new program, the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program, starting January 2012. At the time of this printing, we have not received our starting materials yet, but a sample of one of the questionnaires we shall work with is provided in the Appendix’s section of this report. We plan to continue this evaluation of the program and feelings of our students to see if trends begin to emerge, hopefully trends of success.

Schools are historically a safe haven for children. It is important to determine the causes of bullying and violence at school in order to improve and implement more effective programs so that all students will feel safer at school. When a student has that safe school environment, we shall see an increase in emotional attitudes and academic achievement, thus more students striving for success.

**METAEVALUATION**

My study was started in September 2011, and this report being due in December 2011, I only can report on the pre stages of this evaluation. If given time, I would have liked to have been able to include the report findings of the new program that is to be implemented January 2012 as our answer to the bullying epidemic that has infected our school. The material we are going to be using to fight this problem that leads to more school violence looks very promising, and I would like to compare it to the initial responses of students from these September 2011 surveys.

Although this study reveals what students were doing and feeling, it cannot determine why they did or felt as they reported. More research is needed to investigate what might be causing the recent increases in student perception of violent, threatening and bullying behaviors. One of the central questions to be addressed is why more students said they were feeling unsafe, while at the same time, fewer students said that they had been hurt or feared being hurt at school. I would have liked to have been able to provide more room and time for open responses from students for them to explain some of their responses. E.g. If you don’t feel safe in the bathroom, give a brief explanation of why. I wasn’t able to do this on the first survey, as I didn’t know the ‘unsafe areas’ until after the data was received.

I was also limited in my population, due to the time constraints. I would have rather conducted this as a whole school report, to then see the trends in the data across grade levels throughout the years. Hopefully, with the program implemented with fidelity, we will see a decrease over the next three years and more, as the sixth grade moves to seventh, moves to eighth. If we continue on the program standards, this year’s sixth graders, by the time they are in eighth grade, should feel safer and we may see less school bullying in our halls. My weakness, I feel, is I try to include too much. There is probably enough in this report to break into four other evaluation reports in themselves. I learned in my 510 and 621/641 classes with Dr. Dong and Dr. Surry that I need to work on simplifying my plans to meet one objective, and not be so broad with my research. I am my own worst nightmare, as I give myself too wide of a topic to work with, and can’t reel in onto just one topic area.

**Appendix A. Study Population**

Alabama Student Population, Grades 6-12

 *N*

* Middle School – 8th Grade 857
	+ White 592
	+ Black 224
	+ Hispanic/Asian/Other 41

*Note:* Ethnicity is self-reported as students select from one of the following: White, African American, Hispanic/Latino, Asian/Pacific Islander, Native American, Mixed Origin, or Other. In this table, Hispanic was combined with Asian, Native American, Pacific Islander, and Mixed Origin results since other ethnic groups were a small minority.

**Appendix B. Sample Survey Given**

Sample from pre survey given based off the Pride Survey format:

Name: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ Date:\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Ethnicity: (select one) White African American Hispanic Asian/Pacific Islander Native American

Mixed Origin Other

1. Do you have a job?

2. Does your father have a job?

3. Does your mother have a job?

4. What is the educational level of your father?

5. What is the educational level of your mother?

6. Do you make good grades?

7. Do you get into trouble at school?

8. Do you take part in school sports teams?

9. Do you take part in school activities such as band, clubs, etc.?

10. Do you take part in community activities such as scouts, rec. teams, youth clubs, etc.?

11. Do you attend church, synagogue, etc.?

12. Do your parents talk with you about the problems of tobacco, alcohol and drug use?

13. Do your teachers talk with you about the problems of tobacco, alcohol and drug use?

14. Have you skipped school without your parents’ permission in the past year?

15. Does your school set clear rules on using drugs at school?

16 Does your school set clear rules on bullying or threatening other students at school?

17 Do your parents set clear rules for you?

18 Do your parents punish you when you break the rules?

19 Have you been in trouble with the police?

20 Do you take part in gang activities?

21 Have you thought about committing suicide?

22 Do your friends use tobacco (cigarettes, etc.)?

23 Do your friends use alcohol (beer, liquor, etc.)?

24 Do your friends use marijuana (pot, hash, etc.)?

25 Have you had 5 or more glasses of beer, coolers, breezers or liquor within a few hours?

26 Does your school ask any students to take a drug test?

27 Do you think that you are overweight?

28 Has a doctor told you that you are overweight?

29 Have you bought or sold drugs AT school?

30 Have you bought or sold drugs when NOT at school?

31 Have you carried a gun for protection or as a weapon when NOT at school in the past year?

32 Within the past year how often have you smoked cigarettes?

33 Within the past year how often have you used smokeless tobacco?

34 Within the past year how often have you smoked cigars?

35 Within the past year how often have you drunk beer?

36 Within the past year how often have you drunk coolers, breezers, etc.?

37 Within the past year how often have you drunk liquor?

38 Within the past year how often have you smoked marijuana?

39 Within the past year how often have you used cocaine?

40 Within the past year how often have you used uppers?

41 Within the past year how often have you used downers?

42 Within the past year how often have you used inhalants?

43 Within the past year how often have you used hallucinogens?

44 Within the past year how often have you used heroin?

45 Within the past year how often have you used anabolic steroids?

46 Within the past year how often have you used ecstasy?

47 Within the past year how often have you used meth?

48 Within the past year how often have you used prescription drugs?

49 Within the past year how often have you used pain killers?

50 Within the past year how often have you used over-the-counter drugs?

51 Within the past year how often have you used any tobacco?

52 Within the past year how often have you used any alcohol?

53 Within the past year how often have you used any illicit drug?

54 What effect do you most often get when you drink beer?

55 What effect do you most often get when you drink wine coolers?

**Appendix C. Links to Questionnaires to be given (pdf format):**

Olweus Bullying Questionnaire – TBD January 2012

[olweus\_bullying\_questionnaire\_sample[1].pdf](olweus_bullying_questionnaire_sample%5B1%5D.pdf) or <http://olweus.org/public/questionnaire.page>

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