

Bullying, Not Terrorist Attack, Biggest Threat Seen by U.S. Teens

1/15/2003 by Lisa Lybbert, National Crime Prevention Council

Six out of ten American teenagers witness bullying in school once a day or even more frequently, reported John A. Calhoun, President and CEO of the National Crime Prevention Council (NCPC). The national group today released findings from a survey conducted by Wirthlin Worldwide that show that bullying is the terrorist threat that most frightens America's teenagers and interferes with their education.

Young people are far less concerned about external terrorist attacks on their schools and communities than they are about the bully terrorizing them and their classmates in the hallways and classrooms of their schools. Just 34 percent of teens surveyed stated active concern over another terrorist attack in the U.S.

Calhoun remarked, "While the nation concentrates on defending ourselves from possible external terrorist attacks, we must not forget the threats our children face every day in their school hallways. Policy, resources, and parental involvement must be leveraged to ensure a safe and secure learning environment."

The survey of 512 **youth** ages 12 to 17 by Wirthlin Worldwide revealed that since last year, exposure to bullying has increased dramatically among this age group, but particularly among teenage girls.

Overall, the proportion of those seeing bullying either several times a day or once a day rose from 37 percent in 2001 to 61 percent in 2002. Although daily exposure to bullying among boys increased by 39 percent (from 44 percent to 61 percent), girls' daily exposure skyrocketed an alarming 88 percent in that interval (from 32 percent to 60 percent).

"The impact of bullying on a school climate can be toxic," said former school administrator and current Vice President of Public Policy for NCPC James E. Copple. "Bullies and victims suffer well-documented damage, sometimes long-lasting. We've been overlooking the fact that bystanders experience fear, discomfort, guilt, and helplessness that poison the learning atmosphere even more extensively. The level of bystander exposure is far beyond what many of us expected, especially in the upper grade levels, and its growth is nothing short of terrifying."

For several years, particularly since Columbine, educators and policy makers have been concerned about bullying as a contributor to youth violence in our schools. Their concern was well founded and it does not appear that things are improving. More than half of the teens polled said they could identify a **student** at school who they feel could cause harm to another student, an increase of six percentage points (a 15 percent increase) over last

year's response to the same question - from 46 percent to 52 percent. The increase here was accounted for by more boys reporting that they personally know a student who could harm others (from 48 percent in 2001 to 57 percent in 2002).

"When you're a kid, your school building is like your office," said seventeen year old Tony Morales. "Imagine being afraid of a co-worker you must see every day, it would be pretty hard to get your work done."

The U.S. Department of Education's Bullying Prevention Manual documents the damage caused by witnessing bullying: "Bystanders and peers of victims can be distracted from learning as well. They may:

Be afraid to associate with the victim for fear of lowering their own status or of retribution from the bully and becoming victims themselves:

- Fear reporting bullying incidents because they do not want to be called a 'snitch,' a 'tattler,' or 'informer';
- Experience feelings of guilt or helplessness for not standing up to the bully on behalf of their classmate;
- Be drawn into bullying behavior by group pressure;
- Feel unsafe, unable to take action or a loss of control.

NCPC's prior surveys in this area have documented parents' lack of awareness that bullying is a problem confronting their children. Former school administrator, Steve Edwards, now Vice President of Children, Youth, and Communities for NCPC stated "While schools across America are adopting zero tolerance policies regarding bullying, we have yet to develop comprehensive and inclusive strategies to engage parents, administrators, and students in preventing this threat." Parent involvement, according to NCPC, is key to getting the attention, commitment, and resources needed to reduce and prevent bullying and the fear and other problems it brings.

To address the lack of parental involvement, NCPC launched Be Safe & Sound, a parental advocacy initiative designed to engage parents in a comprehensive approach to school safety and security. Developed by NCPC and the National Safety and Security Council (NSSC), this initiative addresses both sides of the security equation: safety, which promotes prevention activities, procedures and programs that promote positive school climate; and security, which addresses the structural and physical components of school facilities that assure the security of our schools.

Tested anti-bullying or anti-harassment programs at the high school level are largely non-existent; most programs focus on elementary-aged children. NCPC is seeking models that can be applied in the upper grades and shared with schools across the nation.