



COOPERATIVE EXTENSION

Bringing the University to You



Fact Sheet #99-93

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Teen violence has been typically thought of as a problem affecting urban teens attending overcrowded schools in large cities with scarce resources. While this was historically the case, the recent tragedies across the country demonstrated that there is a larger problem. Smaller cities, towns, and rural areas are at increased risk for violence, with the percentage of rural teens engaging in violent acts almost equal to that of large cities (Kingery, Pruitt, Heuberger & Brizzolara, 1995). Many rural and small town community leaders recognize the pervasive nature of teen violence. The following data were compiled at the request of one rural school district to help identify the strengths and concerns of local youth. Other rural school districts may be interested in this approach to addressing the youth violence issues in their own communities.

While this paper emphasizes the need to examine the prevalence of violent behavior, it also may lead to an oversimplification of the causes of violent behavior. There is no one cause of teen violence. We believe that it is important to examine the multiple contexts that influence adolescent development and behavior to understand teenage violence. At this time we know many of the risk and protective factors within each context that are associated with teen violence (Garner & Resnik, 1996; Sakamoto, 1996; Elliot, 1994), yet each situation is somewhat unique and complex.

The following report was developed from the administration of a survey to 6th and 8th-grade students in a rural school district in Nevada. Included in this report are some disturbing and encouraging statistics dealing with pre-adolescent and adolescent attitudes and behavior both nationally and locally. It is important to remember when reading these statistics that the majority of teenagers are not violent and are a source of strength for their communities. Those teens who do get in trouble may turn around. In fact, the majority of teens who are arrested once are never arrested again (National Crime Prevention Council, 1998).

The purpose of this report is to provide information about the attitudes and behavior of adolescents which may be helpful in preventing violence and other risk behaviors that could emerge during the teenage years. This information is being used as a tool to build on those areas where youth, families, schools, and communities are strong and address those where they are weak. The purpose of looking at these statistics in a rural Nevada school district is to discuss ways to increase student safety.

Administration of Safety Survey

The survey was given to 6th and 8th-grade students during April and May, 1998. The survey was designed by researchers at the University of Nevada to assess youth perceptions of their community and schools, concerns and attitudes about various aspects of their lives, and the frequency with which youth report engaging in both dangerous and desirable behaviors. Eighth-grade students completed a 142-item survey. A similar survey was given to 6th-grade students. The survey was shortened for 6th-graders to 98-items. Surveys were completed during school hours with parent permission. Sixty-percent (60%) of the 6th-grade students participated in the survey for a total of 215 useable surveys. Thirty-percent (30%) of the 8th-grade students participated in the survey for a total of 102 useable surveys. Four different elementary schools and one junior high participated. To insure both accurate and honest responses, the surveys were anonymous and confidential. Students were told not to put their names on the surveys and were assured that no one would look at individual responses. They were also informed that the survey was voluntary and that they could skip any item they wished. While this study gathered data about individual, family, community and school issues related to school safety, this report focuses on school and youth environments. All figures show data for the rural Nevada sample.

School Environment

School environments are very influential in the lives of youth. Experiencing a feeling of safety and security in school lowers the risk of an adolescent engaging in violence (Haugan, 1998). Attachment to school also seems to help youth avoid violence. Attachment to school involves liking school and teachers. A majority of the rural Nevada youth sample reported that most of the violence among teens occurs at school. When asked specifically when the violence occurs, most youth indicated that it happens after school or on the way home from school. Figures 1 and 2 show the percentages for the questions about where and when violence occurs. Figure 3 indicates how much the youth like school

Figure 1. Where do you think most of the violence among teens occurs?

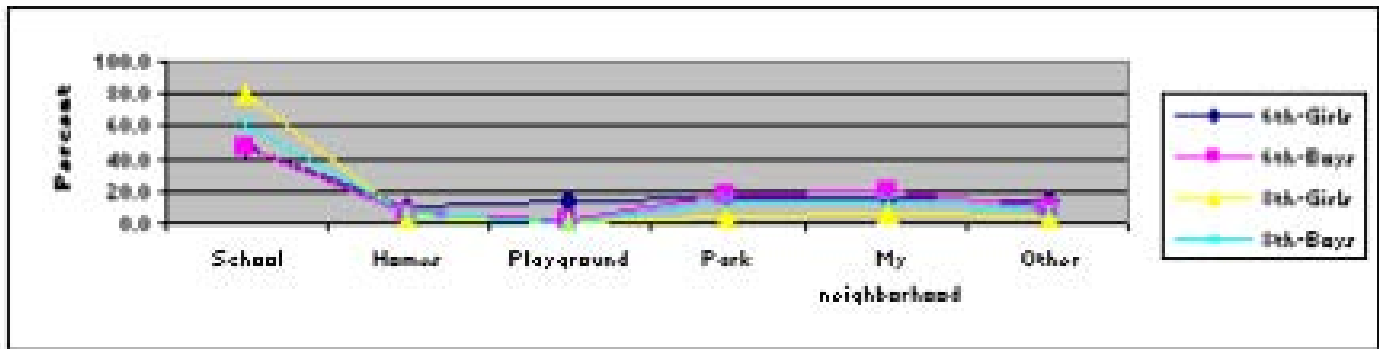


Figure 2. When do you think most of the violence among teens occurs?

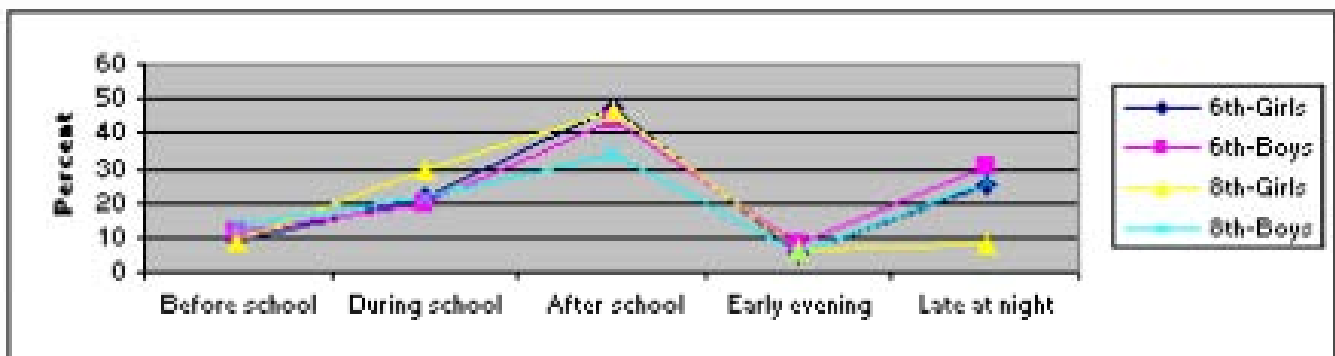
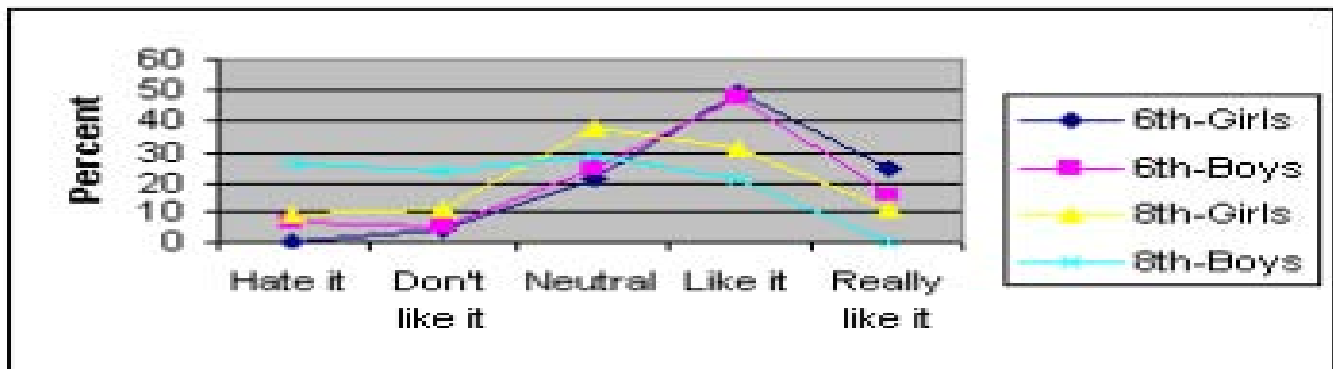
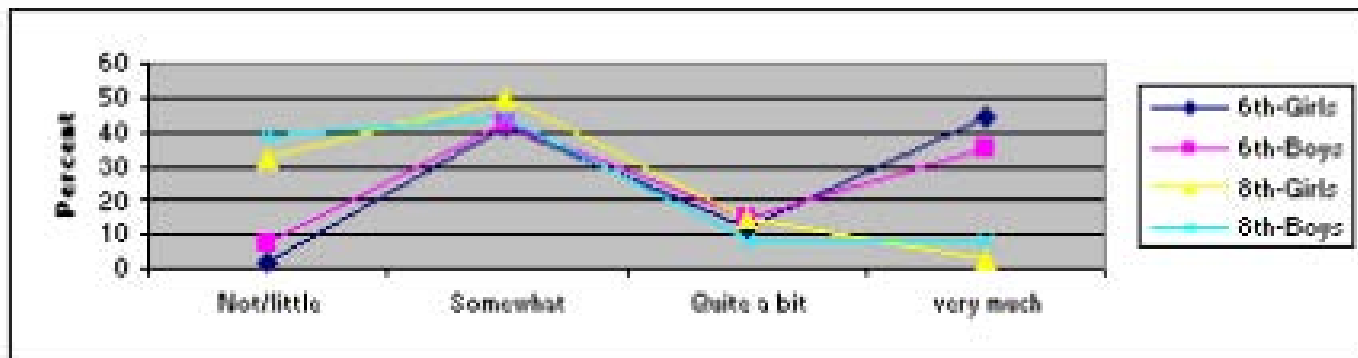


Figure 3. Generally, how do you like school?



Another important protective factor for youth is having a caring adult in their lives. Young people who have a positive relationship with a caring adult are better able to avoid engaging in risky behaviors. This is true even for youth who are at high risk for engagement in violent behavior (Fitzpatrick, 1997). Many times a teacher can serve this function (Haugan, 1998). Therefore, it is important to look at the relationships students have with their teachers. Figure 4 indicates how much 6th and 8th-grade girls and boys in rural Nevada who participated in the survey feel their teachers care about them.

Figure 4. How much do you feel teachers care about you?



Youth Environments

Engagement in violent acts and using weapons is a very common occurrence in the United States today. Studies indicate that as many as 1 in 2 adolescents have been involved in some form of violence in the previous year (Ellickson, Saner, & McGuigan, 1997). Twenty-four percent (24%) of adolescent public school students report being in a physical fight in the previous month (Shapiro, Dorman, Burkey, Welker, & Clough, 1997). Figure 5 presents the percentage of 6th and 8th-grade boys and girls in rural Nevada who have been in a physical fight inside or outside of school. Among students who have been in a fight, Figure 6 indicates with whom the students fought.

Figure 5. Have you ever been in a fight with another youth/teen or student?

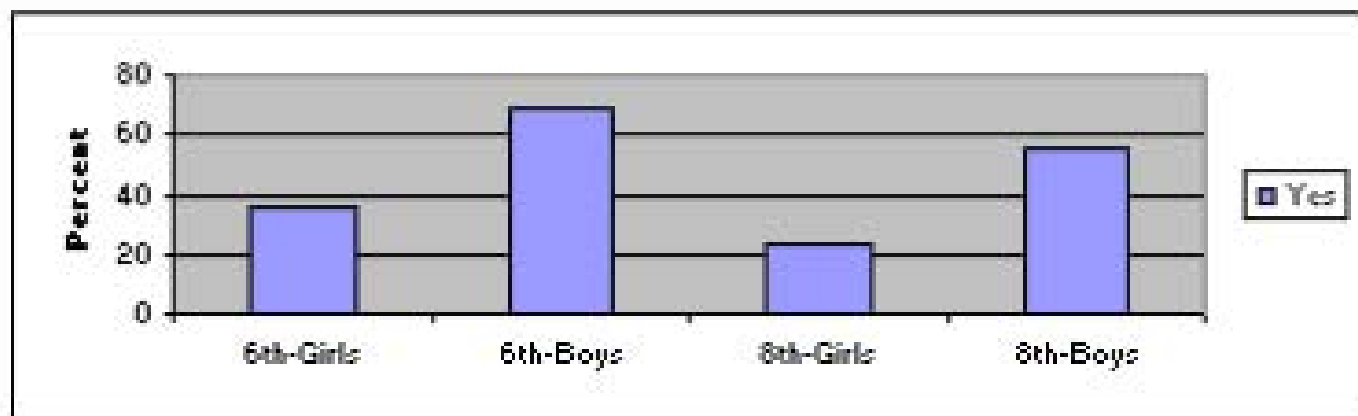
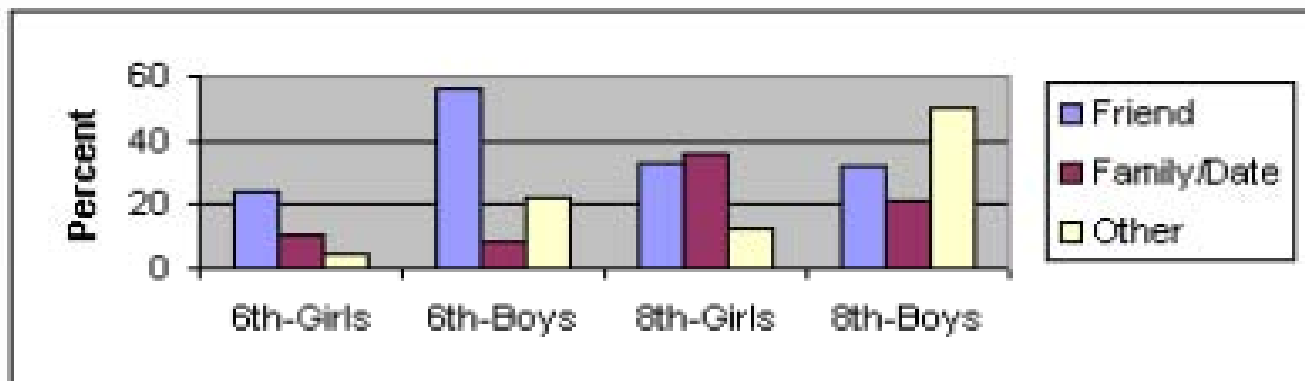


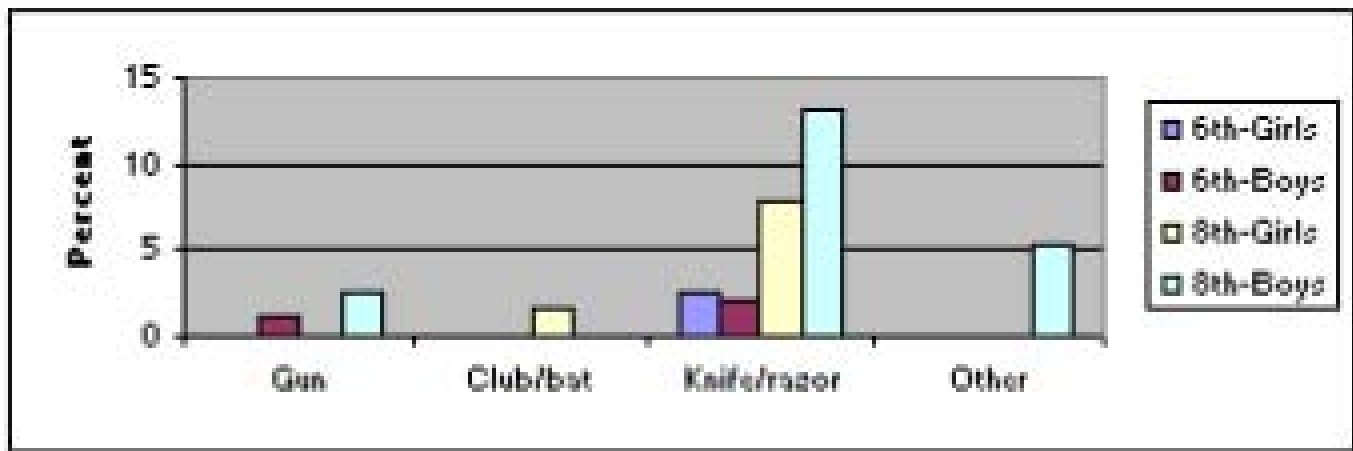
Figure 6. If you have been in a physical fight, with whom did you fight?



The use of weapons is also a serious problem for adolescents today. The FBI reports that over three-quarters of teen homicides involve a gun (FBI, 1993). Studies of weapons found that 13% of adolescents have carried a hidden weapon and over 270,000 guns are taken to school daily (Ellickson, et al., 1997; Haugan, 1998). In the rural Nevada sample, the students were asked "During the last 30 days, did you carry a weapon to school? If so, which most often?"

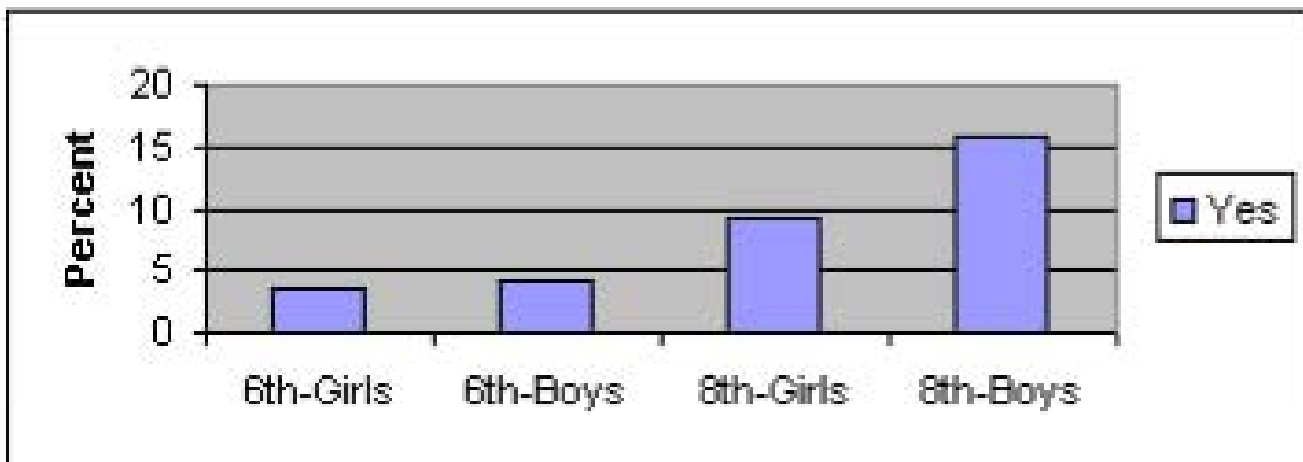
Ninety-seven percent (97%) of 6th-grade boys and girls indicated they had never brought a weapon to school. The news was not as good for 8th-grade students. Eleven percent of the 8th-grade girls and 21.1 percent of the 8th-grade boys indicated that they had carried a weapon to school. The students were also asked what type of weapon they brought to school most often. A knife or razor was the most popular weapon among all age groups. Those percentages are shown in Figure 7.

Figure 7. During the last 30 days, did you carry a weapon to school? If so, which most often?



Gang membership is often linked to youth violence (Dukes, Martinez, & Stein, 1997). In a national survey of 12 to 19 year olds, over 28% of students reported that there were gangs in their schools (National Center for Education Statistics, 1998). Despite beliefs to the contrary, gangs have now been documented in every state (Sakamoto, 1996). In Elko, the students were asked "Are you currently an active member of a gang? Gangs exist in Elko, and students report being involved with gangs, as shown in Figure 8. The most active membership in gangs among the surveyed students is 8th-grade boys. Sixteen percent (16%) of 8th-grade boys indicated they were active members of gangs.

Figure 8. Are you currently an active member of a gang?



These figures indicate some strengths and concerns among the rural Nevada sample. The data is being used to address the issue of violence among youth using a preventative approach before violent behavior further compromises the safety of students. These findings indicate that this rural community in Nevada is not immune to teen violence. Rural educators will be interested in both the results of this survey as well as the methodology used. Replication of the survey in other communities may help alert educators regarding strengths and concerns in their own communities.

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