



# COOPERATIVE EXTENSION

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**Fact Sheet 99-94**

## ***Feeling Safe at School?***

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### **Introduction**

Do rural students feel safe at school? This is the question this report sought to answer for one rural high school. The issue is a national concern and one shared by rural families and school officials. The school shootings over the past few years have gotten too close to home causing even the most conservative school districts to take a look at school safety issues. The recent school shootings indicate that teen violence, typically thought of as a problem affecting urban teens attending overcrowded schools in large cities with scarce resources, can happen in rural areas as well.

The results of this survey are provided to help school personnel, parents, and community leaders put the teen violence issue into perspective. 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 that do get into trouble may turnaround. In fact the majority of teens who are arrested once are never arrested again (National Crime Prevention Council, 1998).

While the majority of students from the rural school included in this report indicate that they feel safe at school, the problem of school violence is pervasive. This report is not intended to minimize the problem. Our 1999 survey was postponed because of the Columbine High School shootings. Interestingly, the survey had been scheduled for April 21, 1999. School administrators postponed the survey for 30 days as they dealt with bomb threats, upset students and parents, and discussions regarding what happened in Colorado and the aftermath of copycat incidents.

Rural schools are not immune to teen violence. 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). This report examines the multiple contexts that influence adolescent development and behavior regarding teenage violence in one rural community. The information may be used by local schools, community agencies, parents, employers and others interested in working together to build on those areas where teens, families, schools and communities are strong and addressing those where they are weak to increase teen safety.

## Administration of the Survey

The survey was administered to 10th and 12th-grades students in May, 1999. Two years earlier, the same survey was administered to 10th and 12th-grade students at the same rural high school during a similar time frame. The survey was designed by researchers at the University of Nevada to assess youth perceptions regarding a variety of school and community issues. The survey contained 179 response items. Only those items related to school safety are included in this report.

Both in 1997 and 1999, the response rate was 72%. Non-respondents included those absent that day, those who chose not to participate and those who returned unusable response sheets. Survey administration procedures were designed to help protect the privacy and confidentiality of all participating students. Student participation was voluntary and passive parent permission was obtained.

## Results

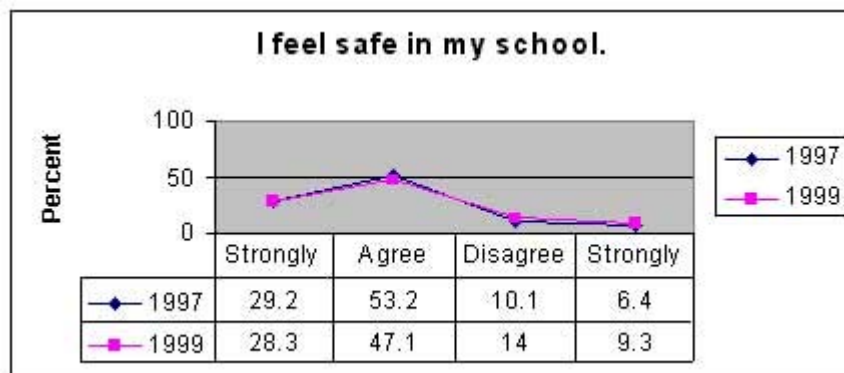
### School, Home, and Community Environments

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 (Hagen, 1998). Attachment to school also seems to help youth avoid violence.

As shown in Figure 1, during 1997, 82% of the students agreed or strongly agreed that they felt safe at school. In 1999, 75% of the students reported they felt safe at school. During both years, 1% of the students declined to reply to this question.

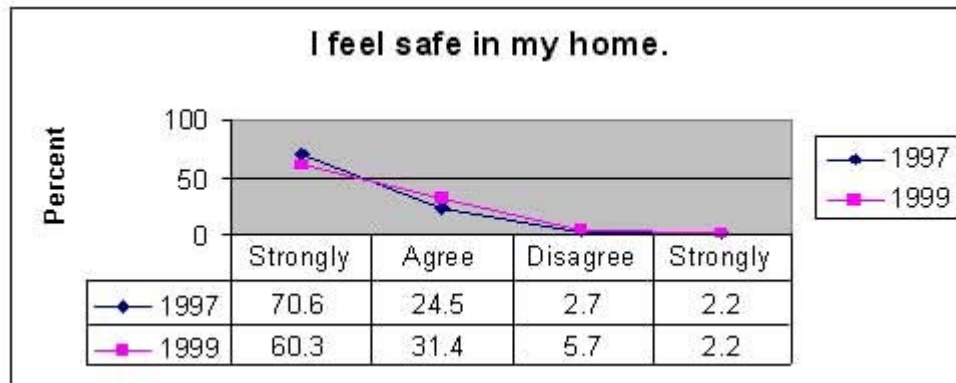
| I feel safe      | Z     | Significantly Different | N   |
|------------------|-------|-------------------------|-----|
| In my school.    | 1.516 | No                      | 803 |
| In my community. | .495  | No                      | 807 |
| In my home.      | 3.144 | Yes (p=.002)            | 809 |

Figure 1. Comparison of 1997 and 1999 replies regarding feel safe at school

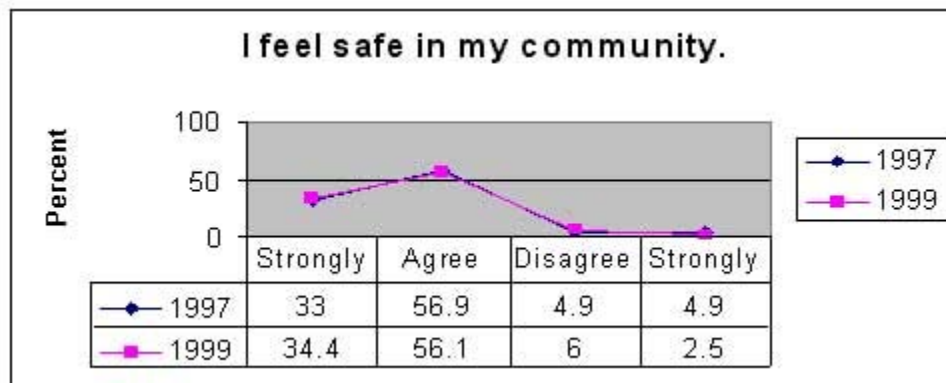


While there is a 7% decline in feeling safe at school, a statistical test of this data was completed to see if the difference is significant. The test is designed to measure the probability that the changes in percentage over the years can be accepted as accurate. A test for non-parametric data was completed (Siegel, 1956). Table 1 indicates that there is no significant difference in students' feelings of safety at school comparing 1997 to 1999 results. Also included in Table 1 are results of analysis regarding feeling safe in the home and safe in the community. There were no significant differences in students feeling of safety in the community comparing 1997 to 1999 responses. The differences reported regarding feeling safe in the home were significantly different. During 1999, students reported feeling less safe at home as shown in Figure 2. Figure 3 provides the percentage response to the community safety questions.

**Figure 2. Comparison of 1997 and 1999 replies regarding feeling safe at home.**



**Figure 3. Comparison of 1997 and 1999 replies regarding feeling safe in the community.**



The actual percentages for home and community safety are shown in Figures 2 and 3. In 1997, 95% of the students agreed or strongly agreed that they felt safe at home. In 1999, 91% indicated they felt safe at home. This 4% decline in feeling safe at home is significant. According to researchers at the University of Nevada, the reason for the significant change in feeling safe at home is the 10% decrease in the strongly agree category. A significant number of students no longer have the high comfort level at home that they reported in 1997. This also follows national trends where a significant number of youth report concerns about violence/safety in the home (Straus, 1991; Kemp, 1998).

As shown in Figure 3, 90% of the students indicated they either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement "I feel safe in my community". There was no significant change from 1997 to 1999.

As indicated in the table and figures above, students report no significant differences in their feelings of safety in school or in the community. There is a significant change in the feeling of safety at home

during 1999. These reported differences regarding a worsening of conditions at home may be related to the decline in the local economy and resulting layoffs by the primary employer. Other indicators of problems at home include students reporting lower satisfaction with having enough food, clothing and shelter in 1999 compared to 1997. This evidence may support the economic condition theory for the decline in feeling safe at home.

School safety issues are a time-consuming and serious problem for teachers, counselors, and administrators. While the data shows that there may be a trend toward students feeling less safe at school, those differences are not statistically different. Five other indicators of school safety/gang membership also indicate no significant differences over the last two years.

While this report emphasizes the need to examine the prevalence of violent behavior in schools, it may also lead to an oversimplification of the causes of violent behavior. There is no one cause of teen violence. At this time we know many of the risk and protective factors within each context that are associated with teen violence (Gardner & Resnik, 1996; Sakamoto, 1996; Elliot, 1994). The role that the home and other factors influence teen behavior is well documented.

The information that this rural school offers to other schools is that it is important to know the root causes of student problems. The trend toward a decline in the home environment reported by these students cannot be ignored. This and other root causes may eventually be a catalyst for trouble at school.

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