Chapter 20

Keeping Rural Schools Safe:
Survey Data From School Superintendents
Across Three Decades

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ABSTRACT

The authors examine school safety and violence prevention among school superintendents in Georgia’s rural public schools spanning three decades. Survey data from 1995, 2005, and 2015 provide points of comparison and contrast regarding efforts by school superintendents to keep schools safe. School superintendents are in positions with the best vantage point to know the strategies and techniques being used to protect students, faculty, staff, administrators, and visitors from crime and violence on school grounds. The longitudinal research design provides a means to sort out changes in school security technologies and shifts in policies and procedures implemented to keep students safe from harm. The authors find that rural public schools have been safe and remain so. The impact of globalization and social media present new challenges for rural school superintendents who recognize that schools are soft targets for those motivated to bring violence to school.

INTRODUCTION

This longitudinal research effort fits into two theoretical areas, one is the emerging body of literature on rural criminology and the other school safety. Here the authors emphasize issues related to school safety within the rural context. One of the unique features of this work is that it bridges three decades, with survey data collected in 1995, 2005 and 2015. Material presented covers questions regarding the scope of delinquent behaviors within rural schools and strategies used by administrators to deal with the same. In terms of methodology, readers will note the technological challenges in obtaining viable response rates to surveys over this time period. In contrast to well-publicized school shootings, we note

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yet another in Kentucky with two fatalities (CNN Jan 2018) as this manuscript is submitted. The authors report a consistently safe environment for Georgia’s rural public school students. Research findings also show how strategies to maintain school safety have changed over time following new policies and mandates. Readers will note the wide variety of responses regarding improvements in technology, and when budgets allow, an increase in social services within schools studied. While school safety remains an area of concern for rural school administrators, the data indicate that school environments are consistently safe for students and faculty.

LITERATURE REVIEW

During the mid-1990’s crime and violence in schools across the nation peaked and the trend toward declining crime rates in the USA picked up momentum. The nation was waging a “War on Drugs” and the effects of drug use and abuse were being felt in schools of all sizes, metro, suburban, and rural. In rural schools fist-fights were the most common form of physical violence, but the threat to school safety from bullying appeared on school superintendents’ radar. The growth of the school consolidation movement meant rural locales were building larger schools and with larger schools came higher rates of student victimization, crime, and violence. Rural schools faced challenges regarding counseling, mental health, and social work support systems making delivery of school safety services problematic due to resource gaps, budget cuts resulting in fewer staff members, and the logistics of serving students across many square miles of rural landscape. Rural schools were most likely to employ passive measures of violence prevention, in part because victimization rates at school are quite low and in part because rural school connectivity and intimacy serve as a buffer for school safety threats. It is also worth noting that guns are directly associated with rural culture such as hunting and personal protection, and were not generally perceived as eminent threats by school officials or parents (Ballard, 1998; Bachman 1992).

The America 2000 plan was the George Herbert Walker Bush Administration’s response for educational system reform. Noted in the report was the role that school safety would play, naming it job one before learning could occur. “Every school in America will be free of drugs and violence and will offer a disciplined environment conducive to learning” (U.S. Department of Education “America 2000”:19). While rural school violence was far less than in urban schools, the intensity of a breach of school safety in rural areas is just as meaningful and the injuries just as real. Drug-related violence in society did, on occasion, spill over into schools and efforts began to make schools “safe zones” where there would be zero tolerance for weapons and physical violence. Superintendents were taking advantage of federal and state funding for security hardware including hand-held and doorway metal detectors.

By 2005, the declining crime rate in the nation together with the general safety of rural schools meant that safe schools were the norm, violence at school was a rarity, and school leaders were stepping up security measures in proportion to the perceived threat. Students were more likely to be struck by lightning than to be killed at school, literally a one in a million chance. The growth of Internet access and social media presented new threats to rural school safety. Cell phones and other new technologies were penetrating the physical environment of the school posing challenges for school superintendents and their duty to protect students, staff, administrators, and visitors. Cyberbullying was starting to be a real threat to school safety. States, encouraged by the Federal Government, were responding to these new threats by mandating school safety plans and crisis management teams. This is a side effect of 9/11 and the realization that terror events were possible in even the most rural isolated school locations. The
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