

## Violence Prevention in Georgia's Rural Public School Systems

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### Abstract

*America's rural schools remain safe havens within a society where concern about gun violence and media fixation on mass shootings and bloody attacks in public venues is common. Parents, educators, elected officials and the public at-large expect schools to be safe even though our culture glorifies and even celebrates violence. This research study documents actions and strategies taken by school superintendents in Georgia's rural public school systems to maintain safe campuses for students, teachers, administrators, staff, and visitors. Variables such as safety technology, student conduct codes, and policies were measured. Superintendents in rural public schools across Georgia were invited to complete a survey and results suggest that strategies being deployed in these school systems are working with only isolated episodes of school violence reported.*

**Keywords:** School Safety, Violence Prevention, Rural Schools, School Superintendents, Georgia, USA

### 1. Introduction

Former President Barak Obama has stated what he thinks can protect students from violence at school. "We need to make our schools safer, not only by enhancing their physical security and making sure they are prepared to respond to emergencies like a mass shooting, but also by creating safer and more nurturing school climates that help prevent school violence. Each school is different and should have the flexibility to address its most pressing needs. Some schools will want trained and armed police; others may prefer increased counseling services. Either way, each district should be able to choose what is best to protect its own students"

Correspondingly, during President George Bush's Administration, the Federal No Child Left Behind legislation (U.S. Department of Education, 2004) touted planning as an essential plank in efforts to keep schools safe, implemented via district local education action plans. The implementation of these plans involved continuous monitoring and reevaluation of information pertinent to each campus. "School violence in the U.S. reached a peak in 1993, according to the National Center for Education Statistics. That year, there were 42 homicides by students in total, as well as 13 "serious violent crimes" — rape, sexual assault, robbery and aggravated assault — per 1,000 students at primary and secondary schools. By 2010, the latest figures available, those numbers had decreased to two homicides and four violent crimes per 1,000 students" (National Center for Educational Statistics). Crime rates in society have been in a thirty year decline, according to FBI statistics, but despite the plunging rates of violent crime, the public's fear of crime is on the rise. There is evidence that the growth of media depiction of fictional violent crime on TV is related to the increasing fear of victimization which the public reports (Annenberg Public Policy Center, June 18, 2014). Even though school crime and gun violence on school campuses is unusual, national debates over gun ownership, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Amendment, and calls for either banning guns or arming teachers and administrators are a certainty after each tragedy.

Data indicate gun ownership by household or by individual is declining, not dramatically growing, as many might

think (General Social Survey, March 2015). Those charged with preventing school violence and maintaining safe schools must navigate this contradictory public landscape where perception and reality are two distinctly different things. School safety policies, strategies, technologies, and physical structures are formulated in response to both real threats and real fears about violence, even when those fears are unjustified by facts. Social media ubiquity and a student culture replete with images of violence make cyberbullying a formidable addition to fistfights at school. In a society that has been at war with terror for over a decade with servicemen and women engaged in deadly conflicts in several nations and with increasing terror threats to the homeland, it is quite a social milieu to navigate for those charged with keeping students safe.

The Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll, a survey which chronicles the public's attitudes about school threats has found that "lack of discipline" which topped the list in the 1970's and 1980's has now slipped to third behind financial support and testing. This is one further measure of how safe schools truly are. A consistent finding from this poll is that parents rate schools higher than does the general public (2012 Phi Kappa Delta Gallup Poll: "What Americans Said about the Public Schools")

## **2. Rural Schools, Rural Culture, Rural Violence**

"Millions of American boys and girls, living in communities where half of students are low-income, just one in five adults has earned a bachelor's degree, and only 27 percent of high school graduates go on to college" says Andy Smarick about rural communities. The school is the most significant public institution in rural America and the glue that holds struggling families to the wider social and economic fabric of the community. Though over half of the nation's school systems are rural, these districts are plagued with higher poverty and fewer economic ladders than their urban counterparts. (Malhoit, 2005) School violence resulted in 155 deaths in a comprehensive study going back over 100 years. Only 26% of the deaths and injuries occurred in rural schools while the large majority (74%) was found in suburban and urban schools (Lambert, 2013). School violence is not restricted to large city schools and the same types of criminal acts reported in metropolitan schools, including theft, vandalism, assaults, and even murder do happen in rural school districts, just not at the same levels as reported in urban schools. Except for home, children spend more time at school than anywhere else and, generally, it is among the safest places children can be (U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, School Crime Supplement, 2015). No matter where the school is located, victimization at school is less than 4% (number of victimized students per 1,000) which means schools are very safe for the vast majority of students.

## **3. Study Design**

Both authors are professional educators whose research interests probe crime and safety themes in rural communities. To investigate how rural schools are making schools safe for students, staff, educators, and visitors, we decided to canvass Georgia's rural school superintendents on an array of strategies, technologies, and actions identified as relevant to preventing violence at school. Our primary target was public schools located in distinctly rural areas of the state of Georgia. Rural schools vary greatly in size and resources making a descriptive study on this subject appealing. Defining rural schools is a technical concern which the National Center for Educational Statistics has addressed with codes used to identify school districts across the nation (National Center for Educational Statistics 2016)

- Rural, Fringe, Census defined rural territory that is less than or equal to 5 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that is less than or equal to 2.5 miles from an urban cluster.
- Rural, Distant, Census defined rural territory that is more than 5 miles but less than or equal to 25 miles from an urbanized area, as well as rural territory that is more than 2.5 miles but less than or equal to 10 miles from an urban cluster.
- Rural, Remote, Census defined rural territory that is more than 25 miles from an urbanized area and is also more than 10 miles from an urban cluster.

## **4. Study Population**

Among Georgia's rural public school systems there are 81 districts which NCES codes identify as Rural, Distant or Rural, Remote.

For the purposes of our study, we eliminated the Rural Fringe coded school districts in order to sharpen our focus on safety in fully rural schools. Many "rural" schools identified as Rural, Fringe, are in fact parts of metropolitan

areas and did not fit our definition of the study population. These 81 rural schools formed our study population and received invitations to complete our survey instrument. Our response rate was 43% (35 school superintendents returned the survey) which we deemed acceptable for the descriptive purpose of our research. Superintendents were initially contacted via email with details of the study regarding purpose of the study, institutional review board compliance and how results of the study would be used. Each superintendent was told that they would receive a web link to access the survey and formally invited to participate.

### **5. Data Collection**

During pretesting of the instrument with two school superintendents we learned that the preferred survey delivery method would be a web link to access the survey sent by email to each superintendent in our study population. As part of the invitation to participate it was noted that each participating superintendent would be entered into a gift card drawing to encourage participation. Two weeks after initial response to the survey invitation, a follow-up email reminder containing the web link was sent to those superintendents who had not completed the survey. At the end of four weeks, those school superintendents who had not completed the electronic survey nor explicitly declined our invitation were mailed a hard-copy of the survey with return mailing information. Later, nearly six weeks after the initial email invitation, a final plea was sent with a closing date for completing the survey. As expected most respondents completed the survey during the first week of data collection, a few more after the follow-up email, and even fewer completed and returned a mailed copy of the survey. Also during pretesting we learned that no optimal data collection time period existed during the school calendar year because superintendents are continuously involved in time sensitive activities such as testing, assessment, recruiting, hiring, and report writing. We worked to avoid the most pressing of the time sensitive superintendent duties to make the timing of our invitation to complete the survey as convenient as possible. Initial data collection began in late March and continued up to the start of superintendent's summer break. The Qualtrics survey software was used to gather superintendent's responses to our questionnaire and SPSS (The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) was used for data analysis.

### **Data Limitations**

There are practical limitations of the data including: 1) time and money factors which influenced our decision to use an electronic survey delivery method recommended by superintendents during pretesting; 2) variation between the electronic and hard-copy format of the survey effects are likely unimportant but virtually impossible to know; and 3) turnover of school superintendents in a small, but substantively important number of school districts, meant that the length of job experience variable, which matters in terms of knowledge of measures we used on the survey, could not be directly controlled. Further, we wanted a higher response rate.

### **6. Data Analysis**

#### **Police on School Campus**

➤ Does this school system make use of uniformed or non-uniformed police officers from the City Police Department? Yes 77% No 23%

Systems use police for general security duty and for traffic control. The use of police officers from the County Sheriff's Department is even higher at 88%

#### **School Resource Officers**

➤ Do you have one or more School Resource Officers in your school system?

Yes 75% No 25%, The most common response was one SRO in the school system.

➤ Do you have the DARE Program in your school system?

Yes 68% No 32%

The CHAMPS Program was in use in more school systems than the DARE Program. One or two DARE Program officers were the most common response among systems that use that program.

➤ Were law enforcement personnel called to any school system campus to control episodes of student related violence or criminality?

Yes 43% No 57%

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- In 2014-2015 were law enforcement personnel called to any school system campus to remove students from school property due to safety concerns?

n=30

Yes 37% No 63%

**Video Surveillance**

- In the past school year has your system used video cameras on system property in any of the following areas?

Figure 1

	Yes	No
Cafeteria n=34	94%	6%
Entrance Areas/Foyers n=35	94%	6%
Parking Lots n=34	88%	12%
Administrative Areas n=33	82%	18%
Stadium/Gymnasium/Playgrounds n=34	82%	18%

- Are there video cameras on school buses in your system?

n=35

Yes, all buses 74%

Yes, some buses 17%

No, they are not used 9%

For systems who are not using cameras on all buses they cited that cameras were old and hard to maintain in functioning order, and also that budget restrictions were a factor in their decision not to use cameras on all buses.

**Security Technologies and Strategies**

- In the past school year has your system used any of these other security measures? Figure 2

	Yes	No
Searches of School Lockers n=24	73%	27%
Use of Drug Alert Dogs n=31	89%	11%
Fixed Metal Detectors n=26	23%	77%
Portable/Hand Held Metal Detectors n=30	43%	57%
Motion Detectors n=32	47%	53%
Intruder Alarms n=33	67%	33%

Use of drug dogs is common as more city police and county sheriff's departments have incorporated dog units into their security forces. Locker searches are also common, much more than use of fixed or portable metal detection devices.

- Are any of the following technologies being used by school personnel for security purposes? Figure 3

	Yes	No
Hand Held Walkie Talkies n=32	100%	—
School Supplied Cell Phones n=34	74%	26%
Personal Cell Phones n=32	88%	12%

Hand Held Walkie Talkies are ubiquitous in prevention of violence in schools. Use of these communication devices permit rural school systems to stay in communication with school bus drivers covering many miles over hours of time.

Also ubiquitous are cell phones but the line between school and personal property is blurred by both convenience

and practical concerns.

### **Student Use of Phones and Book bags**

- Are students allowed to bring cell phones on campus?

n=34

Yes 94% No 6%

- Is student use of cell phones limited to instructional purposes only?

n=32

Yes 66% No 34%

Schools generally place no restrictions on students bringing cell phones to school only that they be used to support the educational agenda. There is also the view that students having access to cell phones can support the school safety agenda.

### **Students and Gangs**

Nearly all school systems surveyed ban or regulate gang symbols, colors or dress among students. But 85% of superintendents said gang-related activity is not a problem in their school system.

### **Violence at School**

- Did you close a system school early due to a bomb threat in 2014-2015? 97% of the respondents answered no. Have there been incidents of arson committed on school property in 2014-2015? Nearly 90% said no.

### **Removal of Weapons**

- Were any guns confiscated from students in 2014-2015?

n=34

Yes 18% No 82%

1-2 guns confiscated was the modal response.

- Were any knives confiscated from students in 2014-2015?

n=32

Yes 75% No 25%

The range reported was 1-6 and the mean was 1 knife confiscated. Among other weapons seized, brass knuckles and numb chucks were mentioned.

### **Use of Weapons and Student Injuries**

Superintendents reported one student received a gunshot wound and one a knife wound on school property in this study. Five students received medical treatment as a result of physical assaults on campus.

- How much of a problem are property crimes such as theft or vandalism in your school system?

n=28

A very big problem	—
A big problem	—
A moderate problem	14%
A minor problem	79%
No problem at all	7%

### **Human Security Resources**

- Select all human resources from the list below that you are utilizing as part of your school safety efforts:

n=29

Crisis Response Team(s)	79%
School/System Psychologist(s)	82%
School/System Social Worker(s)	75%
Mental Health Professional(s)	68%
Other (please specify)	21%

**Instant Alerts**

- Does your school system make use of an Instant Alert Messaging System to inform parents and students about safety problems?

n=28

Yes 97% No 3%

There were 14 school systems that had not made use of the Instant Alert Messaging System during the current school year.

**Social Media**

- How often does student use of social media negatively affect the school safety climate in your system?

n=28

Never 25%

Sometimes 64%

Often 11%

**Zero Tolerance**

- Is it realistic to enforce zero tolerance policies in your system?

n=28

Yes 46%

No 54%

**School Safety Overall**

- Overall, would you say school safety/crime in your system is getting to be:

n=28

More of a concern 18%

Staying the same 71%

Less of a concern 11%

**7. Discussion and Conclusions**

This descriptive report delineates strategies and technologies being used by superintendents in rural public schools in Georgia to keep students safe. While actual violence beyond fistfights is rare in the rural public schools included in this research, there is acute awareness of the possibility of violence in schools and across society. Superintendents know that constant vigilance is a necessary but not sufficient condition of school safety. No matter how isolated the rural school system may be, it is connected to the wider cultural and social systems of American society which include real possibilities of mass shootings and acts of terror. School superintendents in rural Georgia cannot count on intimacy and smaller student enrollments to protect them from acts of violence by a disaffected individual or embedded terror cell, however unlikely it may be. The results of this study point to the fact that schools are generally safe places and acts of violence unusual. The role of technology in protecting campuses grows but the primitive walkie-talkie is a mainstay in safety communications, especially across the vast rural spaces school buses traverse.

Nearly all schools included in this research rely upon uniformed police officers to prevent and deter violence at school. The officers perform various roles, school resources, drug education, campus security, traffic control, and connections to city, county, state, and federal law enforcement agencies. The presence of uniformed officers contributes to the perception of schools as safe places. The majority of school superintendents think school safety concerns are “staying the same” rather than growing or declining. Given the factual basis for their perception of their school as a safe, nonviolent environ, staying the same should be viewed very positively. In sum, for most students most of the time, rural public schools in Georgia remain safe places. There are legitimate concerns about cyber bullying, occasional physical altercations and the potential for violence. Yet the reality is that fear of violence is far greater than actual violence in Georgia’s rural public schools.

This report describes what safety strategies are being pursued in rural public schools in Georgia and the technologies on which these strategies rely. The level of violence, whether perceived or real, reported in urban schools does not characterize these rural public school systems. However, there is an influence of metro on

adjacent non-metro systems. Moreover, research routinely reports rather significant differences in perceived safety among students, teachers, and administrators in the same school systems. Therefore, the results described herein must be understood as coming from the superintendents' viewpoint and they have job and community reasons to be understated in addressing the sensitive issue of school violence. According to the superintendents surveyed, rural public school systems in Georgia are, it seems, relatively safe, disciplined environments, but superintendents report school safety concerns are growing. Perhaps all of the superintendents in this study believe their school system to be very safe at present, most recognize and agonize about the fact that virtually any time someone could violate school safety policies, and produce violence which would undermine public confidence. Technology used to support school safety is not foolproof and in most cases is being used only as suspected problems surface. Even one tragic episode such as a shooting or accident involving a weapon generates public perceptions which may not reflect reality. Superintendents sense the urgency which school safety demands and in the majority of cases, they are not dismissing or taking safety for granted. The researchers appreciate the cooperation received from superintendents and office staff during this project.

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