

WebMemo



Published by The Heritage Foundation

No. 2609
September 10, 2009

School Safety in Washington, D.C.: New Data for the 2007–2008 School Year

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As American students head back to school, many parents will worry about their children's safety at school during the upcoming year.¹ School safety will likely be a top concern of families living in Washington, D.C.

This *WebMemo* is a summary of a *CDA Report* by The Heritage Foundation and Lexington Institute that presents an analysis of 911 calls originating from schools in D.C. for the 2007–2008 school year, the most recent full school year for which data were available.

School Safety by the Numbers. In 2009, the U.S. Department of Education reported that 11.3 percent of D.C. high school students reported being “threatened or injured” with a weapon while on school property during the previous year—a rate well above the national average.² A 2009 evaluation published by the U.S. Department of Education reported that 17 percent of the parents of the first cohort of children participating in the program listed school safety as their most important reason for seeking a scholarship.³

The *CDA Report* found:

- In D.C. public schools, there were 912 incidences of violent crime, 1,338 incidences of property crimes, and 1,250 other incidences;
- In D.C. charter schools, there were 17 incidences of violent crime, 28 incidences of property crimes, and 37 other incidences; and

- In D.C. private schools, there were 28 incidences of violent crime, 131 incidences of property crimes, and 73 other incidences.

School Safety in the District of Columbia. To help policymakers and the public understand the issue of school safety in D.C. schools, The Heritage Foundation submitted a Freedom of Information Act request to the Metropolitan Police Department (MPD) requesting records of crime incidents in D.C. public, private, and charter schools.⁴ The MPD filled this request by providing 911 tape data of calls for crime and emergency incidents at the addresses of D.C. schools. The data presented in this *WebMemo* are limited to crime-related incidents reported to the MPD during the 2007–2008 school year, excluding the summer months. The figures reflect the level of crime-related incidents reported to the police during all hours of the day and night during the 2007–2008 school year.

Incidents of Crime Reported at Schools. While this data set shows that the police department responded to many fewer calls to charter and private schools, this information should be interpreted with caution, and readers should be careful to

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:
www.heritage.org/Research/Education/wm2609.cfm

Produced by the Center for Data Analysis

Published by The Heritage Foundation
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE
Washington, DC 20002–4999
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understand the differences among public, charter, and private schools when drawing comparisons.⁵

Public Schools. During the 2007–2008 school year, 3,500 incidences of crime were reported to the MPD from D.C. public schools. These incidents occurred during all days and times during the school year.

- The 912 violent incidents (1.9 violent incidents per 100 students) included one homicide.⁶
- Simple assault, the most prevalent type of violent incident reported, accounted for 648 reports (1.3 per 100 students). In addition, there were 114 aggravated assaults (0.2 per 100 students).
- There were 1,338 incidences of property crime reported (2.9 per 100 students).
- The most prevalent property incident was theft, of which there were 446 reported incidents (1.0 per 100 students).
- There were 1,250 incidents of other crime-related activities, including 461 reported incidents of disorderly conduct (1.0 per 100 students).
- The sound of gunshots was reported in 49 incidents.

Public Charter Schools. During the 2009–2010 school year, 82 incidences of crime were reported to 911 from D.C. charter schools. These included:

- 17 reported violent incidents (0.08 per 100 students), all of which were simple assaults;
- 28 incidents of property crime (0.1 per 100 students);
- 21 thefts (0.1 per 100 students), the most prevalent type of property incident;
- Three incidents of disorderly conduct (0.01 incidents per 100 students); and
- Two reports of gunshots.

Private Schools. During the 2009–2010 school year, 232 incidences of crime were reported to 911 from D.C. private schools. These included:

- 28 violent incidents (0.16 per 100 students);
- 14 simple assaults (0.09 per 100 students), which were the majority of the reported violent incidents;
- 131 incidents of property crime (0.77 incidents per 100 students);

1. In 2007, a Gallup national survey found that 24 percent of responding parents feared for the safety of their oldest child while at school. See Gallup News Service, “The Divide Between Public School Parents and Private School Parents,” September 7, 2007, at <http://www.gallup.com/poll/28603/divide-between-public-school-parents-private-school-parents.aspx> (August 13, 2009).
2. U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, *Indicators of School Crime and Safety: 2008*, table 4.2, April 2009, at http://nces.ed.gov/programs/crimeindicators/crimeindicators2008/tables/table_04_2.asp (August 6, 2009).
3. School safety was the second-most-cited reason after school quality. See Patrick Wolf *et al.*, “Evaluation of the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program: Impacts after Three Years,” U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, March 2009, at <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/pubs/20094050/pdf/20094050.pdf> (August 6, 2009).
4. For more information, see Shanea Watkins and Dan Lips, “D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program: Improving Student Safety,” Heritage Foundation *WebMemo* No. 2437, May 13, 2009, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/Education/wm2437.cfm>.
5. First, different policies for handling security may partially explain the varying levels of reported crime by school type. For example, the MPD has responsibility for security for D.C. public schools, while charter schools and private schools in the District of Columbia have different arrangements for the provision of school security, including contracting with private security providers. Second, school administration can influence the level of crime and disorder that occurs in schools. Schools that provide students with understandable rules, accompanied by appropriate rewards and sanctions, appear to have less disorder. Lastly, criminogenic (risk) factors may explain differences in reported incidents of crime at these schools. Charter and private schools may be located in safer neighborhoods than D.C. public schools. In addition, the students enrolled in charter and private schools may have behavioral characteristics that are markedly different from those of students attending public schools.
6. The single homicide was committed at Moten Elementary School on Wednesday, October 3, 2007. At approximately 9:54 a.m., police were called to the scene after a body was found near the rear of Wilkinson Elementary School, where Moten Elementary School was located. See press release, “Homicide in the Rear of Pomeroy Road, SE,” Metropolitan Police Department, October 3, 2007, at <http://newsroom.dc.gov/show.aspx?agency/mpdc/section/2/release/11937/year/2007> (August 12, 2009).

- 58 thefts (0.35 per 100 students), the most prevalent type of property incident; and
- 30 incidents of disorderly conduct (0.17 per 100 students).

School Choice and School Safety. One strategy for improving students' ability to attend safe schools is to give families the opportunity to choose which schools their children attend. Since 2004, thousands of low-income children living in the District have attended private school thanks to the federal D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program, which provides scholarships worth up to \$7,500 for private school tuition to qualifying students.

However, Congress and the Obama Administration have taken several steps that threaten to end the program. For example, the U.S. Department of Education sent a letter notifying the families of 216 students who had recently been admitted to the scholarship program that their children would no longer be eligible for scholarships.⁷ The department's decision to withdraw these scholarships forced these low-income families to find new schools for their children for the upcoming school year. Many will likely have no choice but to attend the assigned public schools in their neighborhoods.

The Heritage Foundation obtained a list of the 70 public schools to which these students have been assigned since the Department of Education withdrew their Opportunity Scholarships. Overall, these 70 schools for the 2007–2008 school year had many reported incidents of violence and crime.

- The MPD received reports of 2,379 crime-related incidents from these schools, including 666 violent incidents (2.7 per 100 students), of which one was a homicide.
- Simple and aggravated assault was the most prevalent violent incident, consisting of 555 reported assaults (2.3 per 100 students).

- The schools reported 855 property-crime incidents (3.5 per 100 students), including 278 thefts (1.1 incidents per 100 students).
- There were also numerous reports of other crime-related incidents, including 306 incidents of disorderly conduct (1.3 per 100 students) and 43 reports of gunshots.

What Policymakers Should Do. The *CDA Report* supports previous evidence that school crime and violence are problems for many students in the nation's capital. District and federal policymakers should ensure that all children have access to a safe learning environment. Policymakers, school officials, and the MPD should study the best practices of the safest schools and implement the most effective strategies for reducing violence and crime throughout the District.

In addition, Congress and D.C. officials should expand school choice and give more families the power to choose safe and effective schools for their children. For example, Congress and D.C. policymakers should reauthorize and expand the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Program. This should include allowing new students to receive scholarships so that more disadvantaged children can attend private schools.

At the same time, the District of Columbia should maintain its strong charter school law, authorize infrastructure and support for charter schools, and encourage the growth of its safest and most successful charters.

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7. Editorial, "Presumed Dead," *The Washington Post*, April 11, 2009, p. A12, at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/04/10/AR2009041003073.html> (August 19, 2009).