

IN SEARCH OF A CULTURE OF FEAR

IN SEARCH OF A CULTURE OF FEAR: UNDERSTANDING THE GAP BETWEEN  
THE PERCEPTION AND REALITY OF SCHOOL DANGERS

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## ABSTRACT

Over the past few decades, issues of school violence and crime have received international attention. High profile events, such as the Columbine or Virginia Tech school shootings, have led schools and boards of education world-wide to create and implement numerous policies and procedures in an attempt to keep students safe. However, data on school violence trends demonstrate a far more equivocal situation. School violence trends demonstrate stability over time at low levels of actual violence. In this dissertation, I attempt to account for the gap between the high number of school responses and the relatively low and stable trends in the prevalence of school crime and violence. Three main hypotheses, stemming from the culture of fear, institutional theory, and confirmatory bias, account for this gap. The culture of fear hypotheses suggests that the gap has been created by widespread fear that is pervasive, decoupled from the ecology of school crime and violence, and generated widely by the mass media. Although this is a cultural theory, institutional theory takes an organizational approach to account for this gap. Institutional theory suggests that the gap has been created by institutional processes of schools seeking legitimacy and reflecting how centralized hierarchies respond to the institutional environment, where fear takes a more loosely coupled form, and can be sensitive to the ecological variation of school crime and violence. The third hypothesis is a cognitive one, and suggests that confirmatory bias processes are the mechanisms by which scattered and sporadic acts of school violence receive large scale exposure, and therefore not only are able to generate cultures of fear, but also serve to legitimate policy. These three hypotheses are tested using a mixed-methods approach, including 66

interviews with key-players associated with schools (students, teachers, administrators, and parents), descriptive analyses of existing survey data (e.g., National statistics; Safe Schools Survey), and a content analysis of the media's presentation of issues surrounding school crime and violence. This mixed methods approach provides a unique and holistic approach to test these hypotheses, asking several different research questions of various levels of analysis (from the individual to the community). Explaining the gap between school violence trends and school responses provides a unique contribution to the literature: it furthers our understanding of the complexities associated with school safety; it operationalizes and tests the culture of fear theory which, to date, has not been accomplished, and; it utilizes institutional theory and confirmatory bias in new ways, by applying them to issues of school safety.

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## CHAPTER 1: STATING THE PROBLEM

In recent years, we have been witness to numerous high-profile acts of school crime and violence<sup>1</sup> in Canada, the US, and internationally. These events are receiving international attention, particularly when they involve mass casualties, such as with rampage school shootings (Newman et al. 2004). These types of incidents have made school violence front-page news, and have incited schools, departments, ministries, and boards of educations in many jurisdictions throughout the world to make safe schools a policy priority. For example, in Ontario, the Ministry of Education as well as local boards of education work with progressive discipline approaches (as opposed to more punitive approaches), have a Code of Conduct for each school board that is based on the Provincial Code of Conduct, and have partnered with Kids Help Phone to offer support to students. These and other “safe school” policies have also led to responses including anti-

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<sup>1</sup> “Violence” and “crime” are often incorrectly used as interchangeable terms (Zimring and Hawkins 1997). Thus, searching for the cause of crime and solutions to it are often seen to be the same as searching for the cause of violence and solutions to it. However, this is incorrect, as criminal behaviours are any that are prohibited by law (of which violent crimes is a category), but violent behaviours are not necessarily criminal. Thus, when I write “crime and violence” I am discussing two distinct, yet occasionally overlapping, categories.

<sup>2</sup> It must be noted that some of these expulsions may not be for violent or criminal activity. The Ontario Ministry of Education does not publish the reasons for expulsions, merely the number of students expelled and the enrolment rate for the school year. Nevertheless, the increase in expulsions between the 2000-2001 school year, and the 2001-2002 school year is significant.

<sup>3</sup> *Bill 13: Accepting Schools Act, 2011* was introduced into legislation, and passed the third and final reading on June 5<sup>th</sup>, 2012. It has come into effect beginning September 2012.

<sup>4</sup> Serious violent crimes include sexual assault, robbery and aggravated assault, and violent crimes include assault as well as serious violent crimes. Since the category violent crimes includes serious violent crimes, I have only shown violent crimes here.

<sup>5</sup> Robers et al. (2012) consider the school building itself, the school property, the school bus, or travelling to- and from- school as being “at school”.

<sup>6</sup> As Rodney Stark (1987) argues, geographical and social factors are important characteristics of crime, and we must focus on “traits of places and groups rather than traits of individuals” (p. 894). Thus, ecologies of crime and ecological variation focus on the locations of crime and violence—for this dissertation, school locations—that experience higher risk of criminal or violent activities.

<sup>7</sup> “High risk” is a phrase often utilized to describe adolescents and schools that face disadvantage, whether through poverty, high rates of unemployment, or neighbourhoods characterized by high levels of crime and violence (Swahn and Bossarte 2009). Within this project, schools located in/near the downtown core of the city, which are surrounded by urban neighbourhoods with higher levels of poverty, unemployment, and

bullying programs and mandatory lockdown procedures. Similarly, after events of high-profile school violence, the government has commissioned reports about the state of school crime and violence in Ontario. The resulting reports, *The Road to Health: A Final Report on School Safety* (commonly known as the Falconer report) and *The Roots of Youth Violence*, explicitly accuse schools of being unsafe, and even encourage the dismantling of what they refer to as the “Safe Schools Culture,” in favour of new initiatives that they believe will increase school safety (Falconer, Edwards and MacKinnon 2008).

In this chapter I first examine some of the key responses that Ontario schools have taken to addressing school crime, disorder and violence. Although increased focus on school crime and violence has only occurred over the past decade or so, the school responses that have stemmed from this interest have received widespread governmental support and, as a result, these initiatives have been implemented within schools across the province. Next, I examine how the public perceives school crime and violence. Through an analysis of public opinion polls, it becomes apparent that public concern about school crime and violence fluctuates frequently, with concern heightening after high-profile events of school violence (such as the Columbine school shooting). Third, I explore trends in school crime and violence, demonstrating that there has *not* been any actual rise in the prevalence of student crime, violence, or disorder within schools. The data show either a reduction in trends, or stability at low levels of prevalence. Overall, there appears to be a sizeable gap between reactions to school crime and violence and actual data on them, which suggests that important cultural and organizational processes may be at

work. What, then, accounts for this gap? In the remainder of this chapter I outline the main hypotheses of this project, which center on the discrepancy between the increasing public and school-based focus on school crime and violence and the statistical data that demonstrate that school crime and violence – and youth crime and violence, more generally – are declining.

### **ONTARIO’S RESPONSE TO SCHOOL CRIME AND VIOLENCE**

Within Ontario, the focus on school crime and violence is a relatively recent phenomenon. In 1994, the *Violence-Free Schools Act* was established as a response to incidents of school violence in the United States and Canada “that received a lot of media attention and that raised the concerns of parents and politicians about safety of students in schools” (Anderson and Jaafar 2003:10). This policy, requiring schools and school boards to develop their own safe school policies and discipline codes, was designed to ensure that comprehensive policies were in place to deal with issues of violence that could potentially occur within schools. This policy was the first of many responses to student crime, disorder and violence that are still gaining depth and breadth within Ontario.

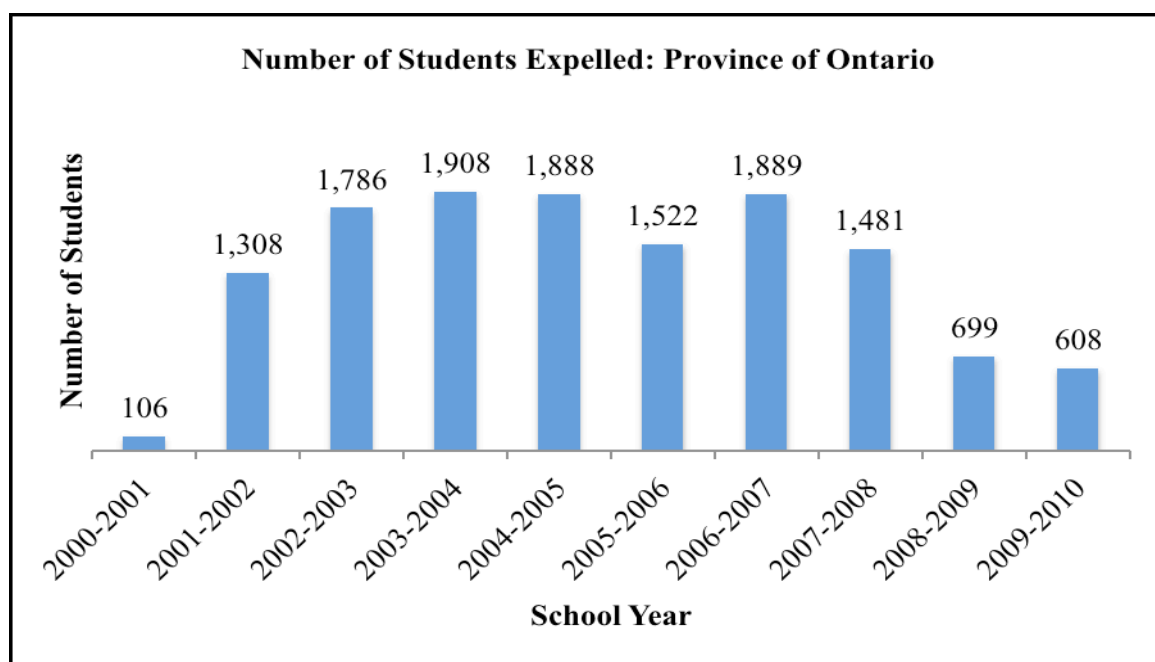
In 2000, many changes came into play regarding behaviour, discipline and safety in Ontario schools. In fact, an examination of *Part XIII: Behaviour, Discipline and Safety* of the *Education Act (1990)* reveals that the earliest date appended to any section within *Part XIII* is the year 2000. Thus, most of the focus on school crime and violence in Ontario has only occurred within the last twelve years. The introduction of the *Provincial Model for a Local Police/School Board Protocol* and the implementation of *Bill 81: Safe*

*Schools Act, 2000* created additional measures to bolster discipline and safety in Ontario schools. Within Ontario, each school board—in conjunction with their local police—is required to have a detailed protocol outlining the procedures for investigating school-related occurrences that require police intervention; the *Provincial Model for a Local Police/School Board Protocol* was developed to ensure that there is consistency of approach within these local protocols. Additionally, *Bill 81* required the establishment of a *Code of Conduct* common to all Ontario schools, which explicitly outlined standards for student behaviour, and mandatory consequences for behavioural infractions.

*Bill 81* also outlined what became referred to as “zero tolerance” policies. For example, suspensions became mandatory for students who engaged in any of the following behaviours: 1) uttering a threat to harm another person; 2) possessing illegal drugs or alcohol; 3) being under the influence of alcohol; 4) swearing at a teacher or other person of authority; 5) committing an act of vandalism causing extensive damage, and; 6) engaging in another activity for which a suspension is mandatory under a policy of the board. Under the same Bill, expulsions were made mandatory for students who engaged in any of the following behaviours: 1) possession of a weapon or firearm; 2) using a weapon to cause or threaten harm to another person; 3) committing physical assault on another person which requires medical treatment; 4) committing sexual assault; 5) trafficking weapons or illegal drugs; 6) committing robbery; 7) providing alcohol to a minor, and; 8) engaging in another activity for which an expulsion is mandatory under a policy of the board (*Bill 81*, sections 306 and 309).

This new “zero tolerance” policy created much controversy, especially surrounding the significant increase of suspended and expelled students. In the 2000-2001 school year, 106 students were expelled. In the school year following the introduction of the *Safe Schools Act*, 1,308 students were expelled. Since then, the number of yearly expulsions has remained high (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2011)<sup>2</sup>. Figure 1.1, below depicts the expulsion rates for students in Ontario from the 2000-2001 school year through the 2000-2010 school year (which is the most recent data available).

**Figure 1.1 Ontario School Board Expulsions**



Data Source: Ontario Ministry of Education, 2011

The significant increase in expulsion rates, along with other controversial consequences of the *Safe Schools Act*, spurred the creation of the Safe Schools Action

<sup>2</sup> It must be noted that some of these expulsions may not be for violent or criminal activity. The Ontario Ministry of Education does not publish the reasons for expulsions, merely the number of students expelled and the enrolment rate for the school year. Nevertheless, the increase in expulsions between the 2000-2001 school year, and the 2001-2002 school year is significant.

Team: a group established to “determine what is working, whether current approaches are sufficient, what impact the application of the provisions is having and where improvements can be made” to Ontario schools (Safe Schools Action Team 2005:3). In 2005, the Safe Schools Action Team was formulated to conduct safety audits of all Ontario schools, and to review *Bill 81: Safe Schools Act*. That same year, the Ontario Ministry of Education launched a bullying prevention strategy, which aimed to have a bullying-prevention program in all Ontario schools by the end of the same year and, partnered with Kids Help Phone, established a bullying-prevention hotline.

Since the 2008-2009 school year, the number of yearly expulsions—which are still higher than they were prior to the implementation of the *Safe Schools Act*—have dropped. This is likely a reflection of *Bill 212: Education Amendment Act (Progressive Discipline and School Safety)*, 2007, which was implemented to address concerns that arose from *Bill 81*. Specifically, the changes removed the term “mandatory” from sections 306 and 309 of *Bill 81* that outline requirements for suspension and expulsion, providing discretion to school principals, and allowing for extenuating circumstances to be addressed prior to deciding whether to suspend or expel a student. Even though the behaviours leading to possible suspension or expulsion are virtually identical in both Bills, *Bill 212* adds “bullying” as an additional behaviour that could potentially lead to suspension (*Bill 212*, section 306). Additionally, under this new Bill, students who are suspended or expelled must be assigned to a program for suspended and expelled pupils provided by the board.



In 2009, Ontario introduced *Bill 157: Education Amendment Act (Keeping Our Kids Safe at School), 2009*, which came into force in February of 2010. This legislation requires that: school staff intervene and address any inappropriate or disrespectful behaviour among students; staff report any and all serious or violent incidents to the principal; and that the principal contacts the parents of the victimized students (*Bill 157*). Additionally, all schools within Ontario have established “lockdown” procedures within their schools. The Ontario Association of Chiefs of Police (OCAP) submitted a report outlining the need to develop and practice effective lockdown plans and procedures within each school across the province (OCAP 2008), and the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Community Safety and Correctional Services made the creation and bi-annual practice of lockdown procedures mandatory in 2010, as part of the revised *Provincial Model for a Local Police/School Board Protocol* (OCAP 2008).

Most recently, in 2011 *Bill 13: Accepting Schools Act, 2011* was introduced into legislation<sup>3</sup>. The focus of this Bill is acceptance and inclusion, and includes measures to increase counselling services to students, to provide resources to those involved in bullying (both the victim and the bully), and provisions for the creation of student groups for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, transsexual, two-spirited, intersex, queer and questioning (LGBTTIQ) youth (*Bill 13*).

Although it is not mandatory, many schools are also implementing additional security provisions, including the use of video cameras for surveillance, the hiring of security guards, and even the presence of armed police officers within the schools. For

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<sup>3</sup> *Bill 13: Accepting Schools Act, 2011* was introduced into legislation, and passed the third and final reading on June 5<sup>th</sup>, 2012. It has come into effect beginning September 2012.

example, in the 2008-2009 school year, the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) implemented uniformed and armed police officers (called School Resource Officers) within 30 high schools in the Toronto area. This partnership between the TDSB and the Toronto Police Service is claimed by school and police officials to be a proactive approach to ensuring the safety of schools that benefits both the students and the community. An additional 19 TDSB high schools received School Resource Officers in the 2009-2010 school year (TDSB 2008).

The implementation of armed police officers within schools came as a direct result of the School Community Safety Advisory Panel's 2008 Report, entitled *The Road to Health: A Final Report on School Safety*. This report, more commonly referred to as the Falconer report, made over 100 recommendations for methods to improve the safety and security of Toronto high schools. In addition to recommending uniformed and armed School Resource Officers, the report also recommends undertaking random searches using canine units that specialize in firearms detection, locking all doors to the school other than the main entrance (which they recommend be supervised by an adult at all times), and implementing school uniforms and identification tags ("lanyards") at all schools (Falconer et al. 2008:Volume 3).

The Falconer report was commissioned after 15-year-old Jordan Manners was fatally shot at his Toronto high school in May of 2007. It was intended to specifically outline methods for "improving practices in TDSB schools with regards to prevention, school supervision, discipline and security..." (Falconer et al. 2008:Volume1:4). Another report, *The Roots of Youth Violence*, which also came as a result of Manners' untimely

death, was commissioned “not to simply ask for short-term ideas about how to deploy yet more law enforcement resources to try to suppress this kind of violence,” but to understand the root causes of school violence (McMurty and Curling 2008:1). The recommendations from this report are quite broad, for example suggesting that the Ontario government address issues of poverty, racism, equality, and mental health in order to address the roots of youth violence.

Both of these high-profile reports describe Ontario—and specifically Toronto—schools as being in dire straits. The recommendations presented by these reports give the sense that unless school safety protocols are drastically overhauled, violence in schools will reach epidemic levels. In fact, when summarizing their own findings, McMurty and Curling (2008) claim that:

Ontario is incubating an increase in youth violence, and in more serious violence. These trends are deeply troubling. They include the increasing concentration of violent crime among younger people, the increasing frequency with which guns and knives are being used in disputes that might previously have been settled with fists, the increasing intensity and ferocity of the violence, the increasingly public nature of extreme violence, the growth in the prevalence of both guns and gangs, neighbourhoods trapped in a downward cycle of disadvantage and being challenged to provide the solidarity and positive role-modelling needed to help stem the violence, and a broader community inclined to write off these youth and these communities because they see them as the source of this problem rather than its victims. (P. 3)

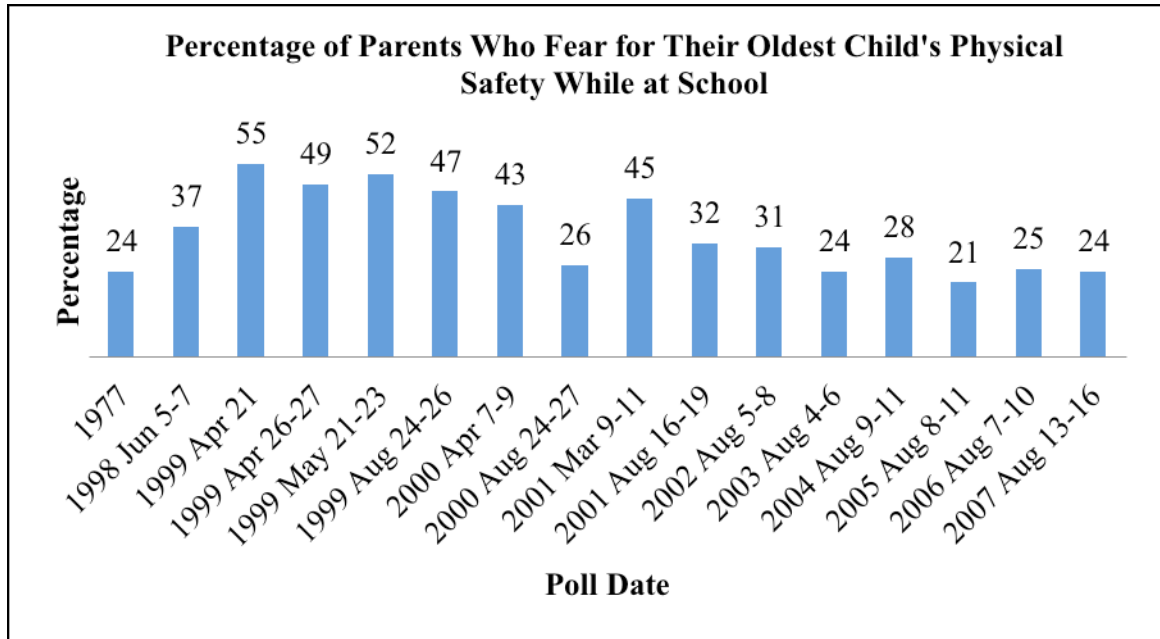
The number of violence-related government policies, the exceptionally high numbers of expelled students, and the dire tone of these reports leaves the impression that Ontario schools are dangerous places for anyone and everyone. However, as the sections below will demonstrate, this is not actually the case. In fact, Ontario schools are safe places for most students, especially given the fact that approximately 1.4 million students

attend more than 4,000 publicly funded elementary schools, and 700,000 students attend more than 850 publicly funded high schools within Ontario (Ontario Ministry of Education, N.d.). In the following section I will explore the public's perception of school crime and violence, and demonstrate that concern for school violence fluctuates frequently, with heightened concern appearing after events of high-profile school violence.

### **PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS OF SCHOOL CRIME AND VIOLENCE**

Although there have been numerous policy responses to school crime and violence, and governmental reports on the state of school disorder paint an overwhelmingly dire picture, Carroll (2007) points out that American parents' concern for their child's safety while at school has fluctuated over the past three decades. Part of this fluctuation stems from the fact that concern spikes immediately following a highly-publicized event of extreme school violence, such as a school shooting. As demonstrated in Figure 1.2, a Gallup poll of American adults found that the percentage of parents who feared for their oldest child's safety while at school peaked at 55% on April 21<sup>st</sup> 1999, the day after the Columbine school shooting. This fear remained relatively high in the days and months following this school shooting, but did decline. It spiked again to 45% in March of 2001, following two school shootings in Santee, California, and in Williamsport, Pennsylvania (Carroll 2007). Thus, we can see that parental fear is not consistent, and since it fluctuates so frequently, fear of school crime and violence may be influenced by extreme acts of high profile violence as opposed to direct experience.

**Figure 1.2 Parents Fearing For Child’s Safety at School**

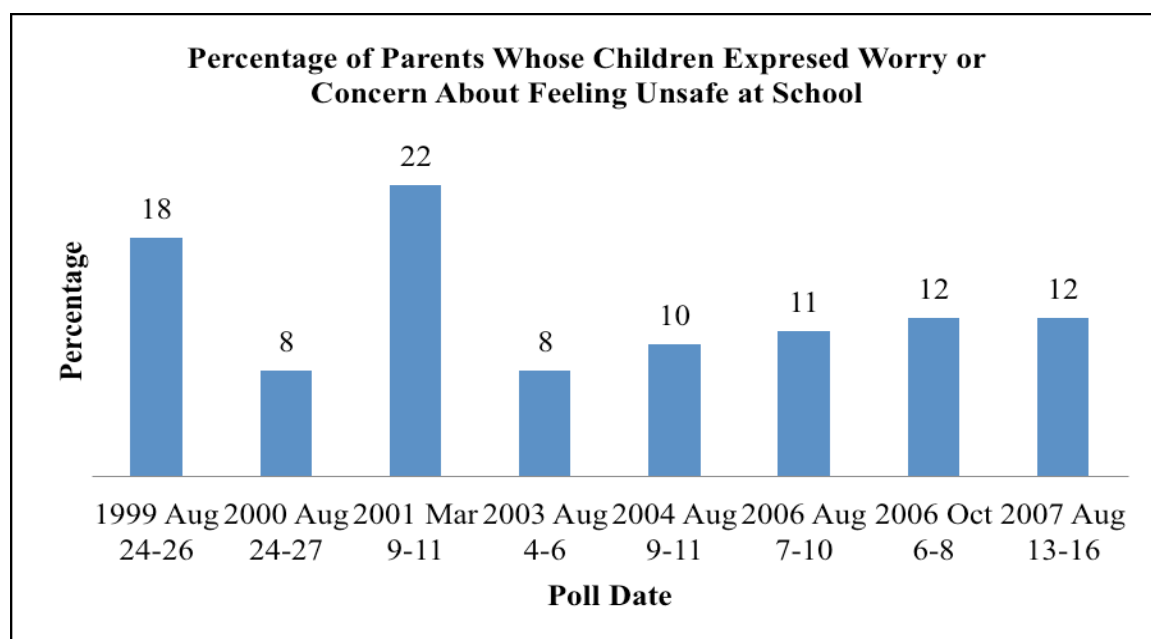


Data Source: Carroll 2007 (Gallup Poll, U.S.)

Whereas few students express concern over school safety to their parents (typically only 8-12% of children express concern to their parents), students reporting concern for school safety also spikes after highly publicized events of school violence (see Figure 1.3). Once again, in the Gallup poll of American adults following the Columbine school shooting, 18% of parents said that their children had expressed concern about school safety. In 2000, this dropped to a typical level of 8%, but it spiked once again in 2001, reaching an all-time high of 22% after the two school shootings taking place in Santee, California, and Williamsport, Pennsylvania. This number dropped again to 8% in the next polling year, but has increased slightly with each poll (Carroll 2007). It is clear that fear of school crime and violence is influenced by extreme events, such as school shootings. However, these types of events are extremely rare occurrences that directly affect only very few individuals. Thankfully, most people do not have direct

personal experience with acts of extreme school violence, yet there is still reported fear and concern for students' safety. It seems, then, that this fear is not based on imminent threat, but instead stems from distant news sources and media reports on these disparate events.

**Figure 1.3 Parents with Worried / Concerned Children**

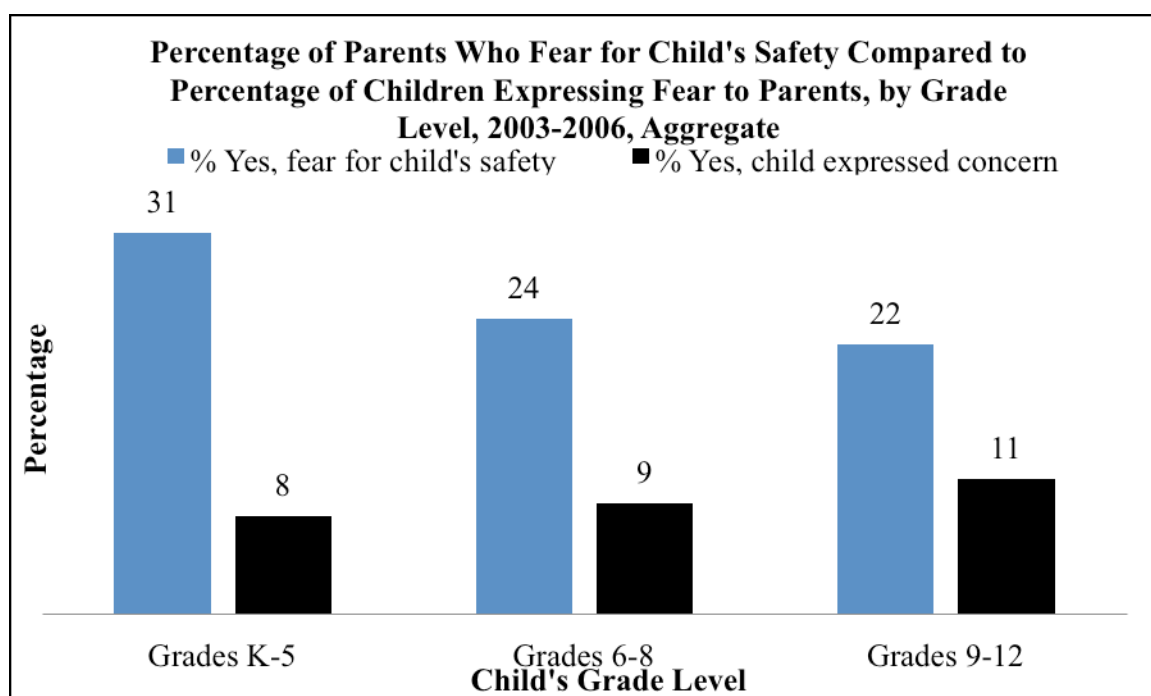


Data Source: Carroll 2007 (Gallup Poll, U.S.)

Furthermore, it is apparent that there are far more worried parents than students: according to parental reports, a much greater percentage of parents fear for their child's safety at school than their children fear for their own safety. This is especially intriguing: the fact that children are less fearful than their parents demonstrates that fear is stemming from something other than direct personal experience. When data are aggregated by grade (see Figure 1.4), parents fear more for their younger children than their older children; however, older students report fearing for their safety to their parents more often than younger children. Although 31% of parents fear for their K-5 children, only 8% of parents

report that their K-5 children fear for their own safety, according to a Gallup poll of U.S. residents. As children get older, it seems that parents fear less for their children’s safety, but older children report being more fearful than younger children: 22% of parents fear for their high school aged children (grades 9-12), and 11% of parents report that their high school aged children have expressed fear for their own safety (Jones 2006).

**Figure 1.4 Parents and Children Expressing Fear**

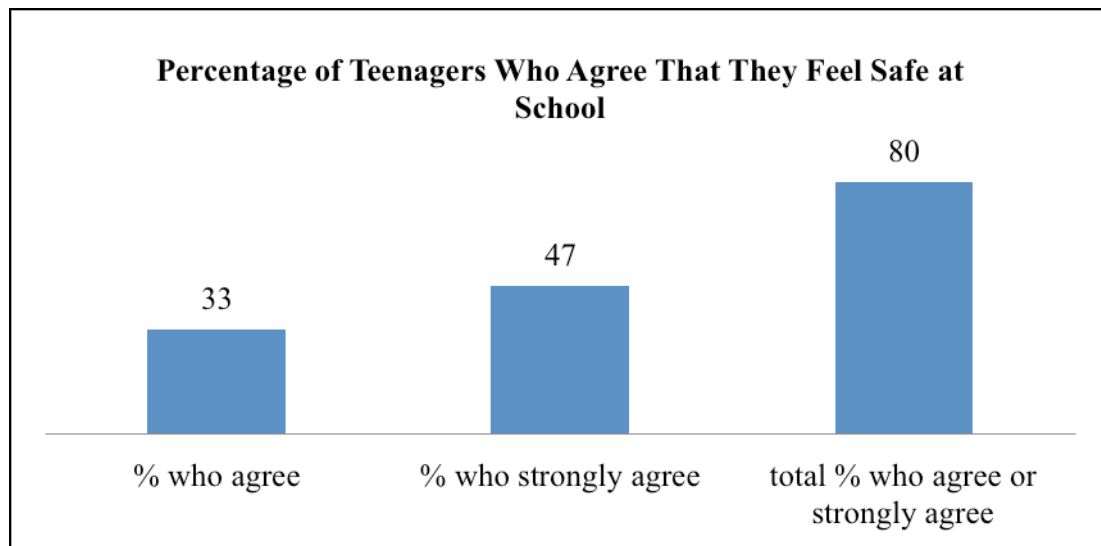


Data Source: Jones 2006 (Gallup Poll, U.S.)

When teenagers themselves are polled, the vast majority report feeling safe at school. A 2005 Gallup poll found that 80% of American teenagers either agree or strongly agree that they feel safe at school (see Figure 1.5). When this number is broken down by response category, we can see that 33% of the teenage respondents agreed that they feel safe at school, and 47% of the teenage respondents strongly agreed that they feel safe at school (Lyons 2005). Since the overwhelming majority of polled teenagers report

feeling safe at school, it is extremely important to question why school crime and violence are such significant policy priorities for schools; students do not feel as though they are in danger, yet schools are often portrayed as being dangerous and scary places for teenagers to be. This indicates that there is something more to the story, which is exactly what is explored in this dissertation.

**Figure 1.5 Teenagers That Feel Safe at School**



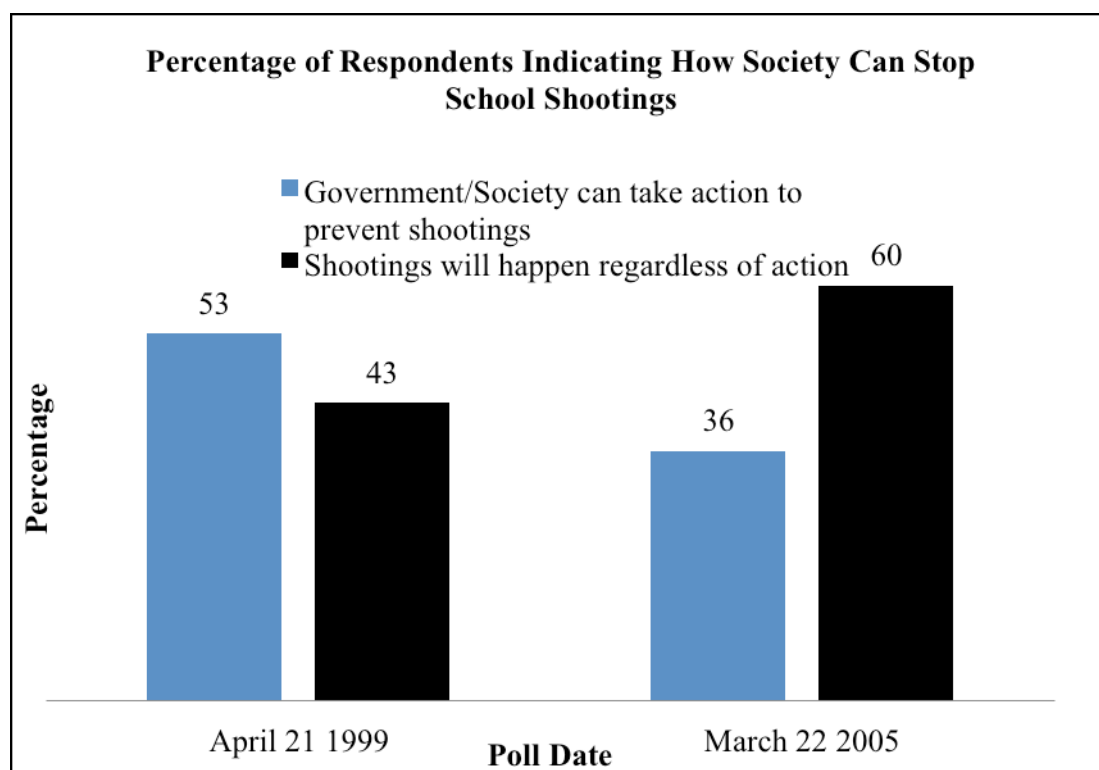
Data Source: Lyons 2005 (Gallup Poll, U.S.)

Immediately following the Columbine shooting in 1999, Gallup polled Americans to determine how they felt the government and society could be involved to help stop something so tragic from occurring again. The results, presented in Figure 1.6, show that 53% of respondents believed that the government or society could take action to prevent school shootings; 43% of respondents believed that shootings would occur regardless of intervention or action. Six years later, following the Red Lake, Minnesota shooting, Gallup polled Americans again; this time, 36% of respondents believed that the government or society could take action to prevent school shootings (down 17% from the



previous poll); 60% of respondents believed that shootings would occur regardless of intervention or action (Keifer 2005). This loss of faith in the public school system, government interventions, and school safety policies and programs is problematic for schools, as it challenges their legitimacy. When schools take extra efforts to respond to generalized concerns of school crime and violence—as opposed to responding only to immediate threats—their responses may be more as a means of retaining legitimacy and appeasing stakeholder relations, and less about actually protecting the students.

**Figure 1.6 Respondents’ Beliefs Whether School Shootings Can be Stopped**

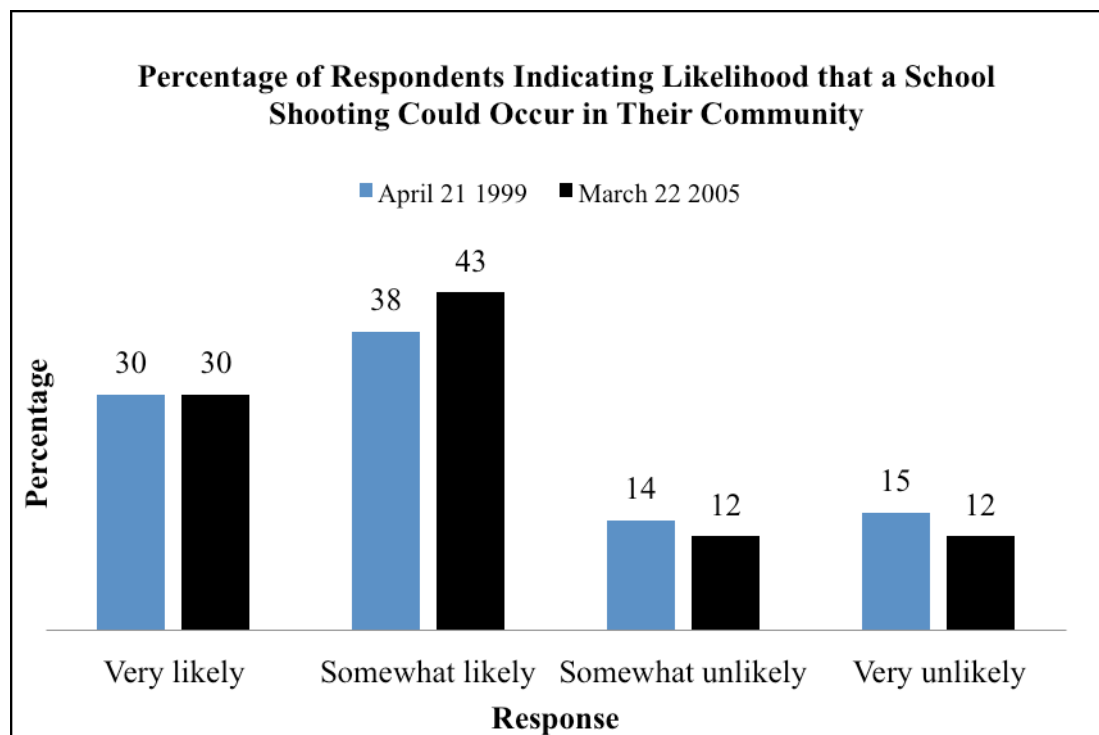


Data Source: Keifer 2005 (Gallup Poll, U.S.)

After each of the same shootings, Gallup polled Americans to find out what they believed to be the likelihood of a school shooting happening in their community (see Figure 1.7). After the Columbine shooting in 1999, 68% of respondents felt that a

shooting in their community was either “somewhat likely” or “very likely”; 29% of respondents felt that a shooting in their community was either “somewhat unlikely” or “very unlikely”. Six years later, in the days following the Red Lake shooting, the same poll was given, but the results differed: this time, 73% of respondents felt that a shooting in their community was either “somewhat likely” or “very likely” (an increase of 5%); 24% of respondents felt that a shooting in their community was either “somewhat unlikely” or “very unlikely” (Keifer 2005). This indicates that constituent demand for the implementation of school policies is highly unstable, and fluctuates frequently.

**Figure 1.7 Respondents Indicating School Shooting Can Occur in Their Community**



Data Source: Keifer 2005 (Gallup, U.S.)

As social institutions immersed in society, schools must respond to public pressures: when public expressions of fear are expressed, they can be quite influential. As

demonstrated above, this fear is often based on distant media reports of anomalous events and not based on any imminent threat or increased risk to students or staff. Similarly, reports of fear will peak after a high profile event and then eventually dissipate. However, the school system will respond on a broad level, implementing system-wide policies and procedures aimed at quenching this general fear. These system responses, as opposed to individual school responses aimed at reducing particular behaviours or responding to local incidents of school crime and violence, are a response to generalized, distant fear. The responses that are implemented to quench this fear tend to remain a part of the school system for a long time, even after the fear has dissipated. System-wide policies – such as those in *Bill 81*, *Bill 212*, *Bill 13*, and *Bill 157* – do not fade away in the same way that fear of school crime and violence does.

### **DATA SHORTAGES AND AMBIGUITIES**

Before examining existing data on school crime and violence, it is important to acknowledge that there are problems at play when attempting to discern just how much violence and crime occurs in schools. For example, few countries have collected statistical data on the problem of school crime and violence, and thus international comparisons are virtually impossible (Debarbieux 2003). When these data do exist, they often come in the form of occasional surveys, not longitudinal surveys. These data are informative, though they do not allow for long-term measurement, making it difficult to determine trends in school crime and violence over time. Other than the American *Safe Schools Study*, very few comprehensive studies existed prior to 1980, which also hinders the examination of longitudinal trends (Brown and Munn 2008). Much of the data used in

this project come from American sources for two reasons. First, there are more American data available than Canadian data. Second, American data are instructive for Canadian cases, especially in regard to high profile events like school shootings. The Canadian media report extensively on events such as Columbine and Virginia Tech, and many school anti-violence policies are based on these high profile events from the United States.

Another challenge is that research on many aspects of school violence and crime are not always clearly defined. For example, much research does not distinguish between student misconduct (such as truancy, disrespect or minor violation of school policies) and more serious student offending (such as theft, larceny or assault) (Welsh, Greene and Jenkins 1999; Welsh 2000). As a result, many researchers use police-reported statistics as a determinant. Yet, these data have their own set of problems, the most significant is that changes in the law and changes in policing practices will affect reported incidences for many types of crime, and changes in legally required reporting practices can affect the resultant crime rate (Stevenson et al. 1998).

Furthermore, suspension and expulsion rates are often used to measure the extent of school violence (Adams 1993). However, the use of suspension and expulsion rates only measures the disciplinary outcome; it does not explore *why* the students were suspended or expelled (e.g., violence, crime, or other issues such as persistent truancy), nor does it account for the reasons that these behaviours occurred in the first place (e.g., the social or cultural conditions of the school or community that lead to the violent or criminal occurrence). Suspensions and expulsions also serve as measures only of the

prevalence of the students who were *caught* for infractions, not the prevalence of actual infractions. And, as demonstrated previously, changes to school policies and practices can affect how student behaviours are defined. Prevalence is much more difficult to determine for ambiguous behaviours than for rather clear-cut behaviours. The prevalence of objectively defined offences, like murder for example, are less susceptible to changing school policies and practices as they will always be well-defined and policed; however, more ambiguous behaviours, like bullying for example, have wide-ranging definitions and are susceptible to discretionary practices.

Additionally, as Toby (1983) points out, schools with increased structural responses (such as security guards or cameras) are often schools that have more crime and violence. He claims that the “chicken/egg problem confuses the issue” (p. 26): it is unclear whether the guards and cameras are implemented because there is a problem of crime and violence, or if the presence of guards and cameras serves to detect more crime and violence. Even though it is extremely difficult to determine how much school crime and violence is actually occurring in schools, parents, teachers, and the general public often hear about increases in suspension and expulsion rates, or additional security implementations, and these can lead to the false perception that school crime and violence are very common, or increasingly frequent, occurrences.

Over the past two decades, many researchers have attempted to determine the frequency and severity of school crime and violence. Keeping in mind the limitations of these data, they do demonstrate that incidents of extreme school violence are quite

infrequent, and that trends in school violence have remained relatively stable at low levels. It is to these statistics that we now turn.

### **SCHOOL CRIME AND VIOLENCE TRENDS**

Over the past decade, there has been a dramatic increase in concern about student victimization in schools (Hanke 1996; Schwartz et al. 2000; Stein 2005; Burrow and Apel 2008). Burrow and Apel (2008) claim that this increased concern has stemmed from research studies and media reports of school shootings and other forms of school violence and school disorder, including assaults on teachers and students (Toby 1983; Menacker, Weldon and Hurwitz 1990; Anderson 1998; Elliot, Hamburg and Williams, 1998; Lawrence 1998; Miller and Chandler 2005). Further, they demonstrate that almost all of the research studies and media reports have an underlying message that there is a persistent fear *for* students—and *by* students—who are no longer safe in their schools (Burrow & Apel 2008).

However, systematic data on prevalence and trends in school crime and violence reveal a far more equivocal situation than that put forth by reports such as *The Roots of School Violence* or the Falconer report. Recent Canadian data show that about one-tenth of all youth criminal code (excluding traffic) violations occur at school, and of those, only 30% involved assault and 20% were drug-related (Taylor-Butts and Bressan 2008). Furthermore, in Canada only 7% of all youth crimes on school grounds involved weapons, and of those, less than 1% involved firearms (Taylor-Butts and Bressan 2008). These figures have remained consistent over the years, according to police-reported data from 1998 to 2006 (Taylor-Butts and Bressan 2008). There is no clear evidence of any

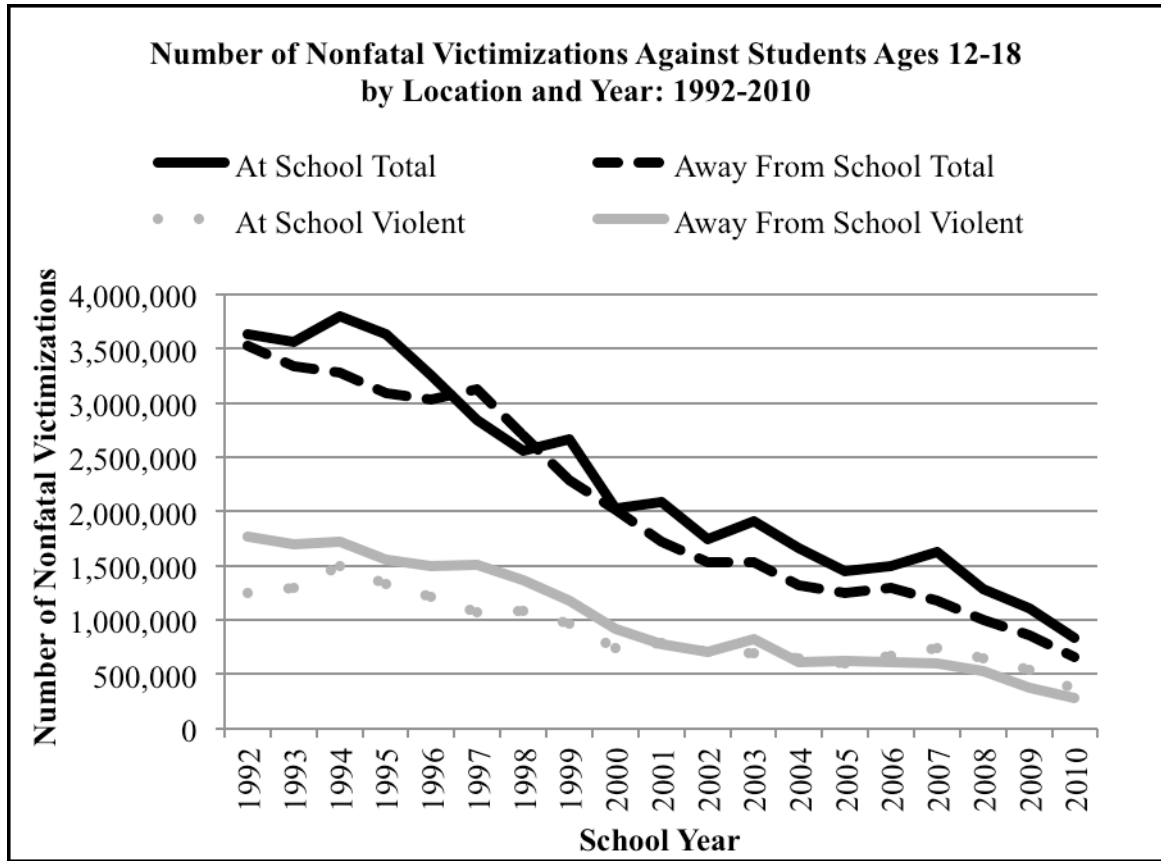
actual rise in the prevalence of student crime or violence. In fact, the data demonstrate either a reduction in trends, or consistency at relatively low levels.

According to the American report *Indicators of School Crime and Safety*, Dinkes, Cataldi, and Lin-Kelly (2007) claim that there is some evidence that student safety has actually improved in schools. High school students' (ages 12-18) victimization rates both at home and at school declined between 1992 and 2005 (see Figure 1.8). In fact, this decrease is true for the total crime rate, as well as for instances violent crimes, and serious violent crimes<sup>4</sup> (Dinkes et al. 2007). Similarly, between 2009 and 2010 the total crime victimization rate declined from 43 victimizations per 1000 students to 32 victimizations per 1000 students (Robers et al. 2012). It is apparent that the rates of student-reported nonfatal crimes are relatively equivalent regardless of location (at school or away from school). The number of violent crimes is much smaller than the number of total crimes, again regardless of location. Nevertheless, the media, academics, and the public attend significant focus to the problem of school violence.

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<sup>4</sup> Serious violent crimes include sexual assault, robbery and aggravated assault, and violent crimes include assault as well as serious violent crimes. Since the category violent crimes includes serious violent crimes, I have only shown violent crimes here.

**Figure 1.8 Student Reported Nonfatal and Violent Crimes**



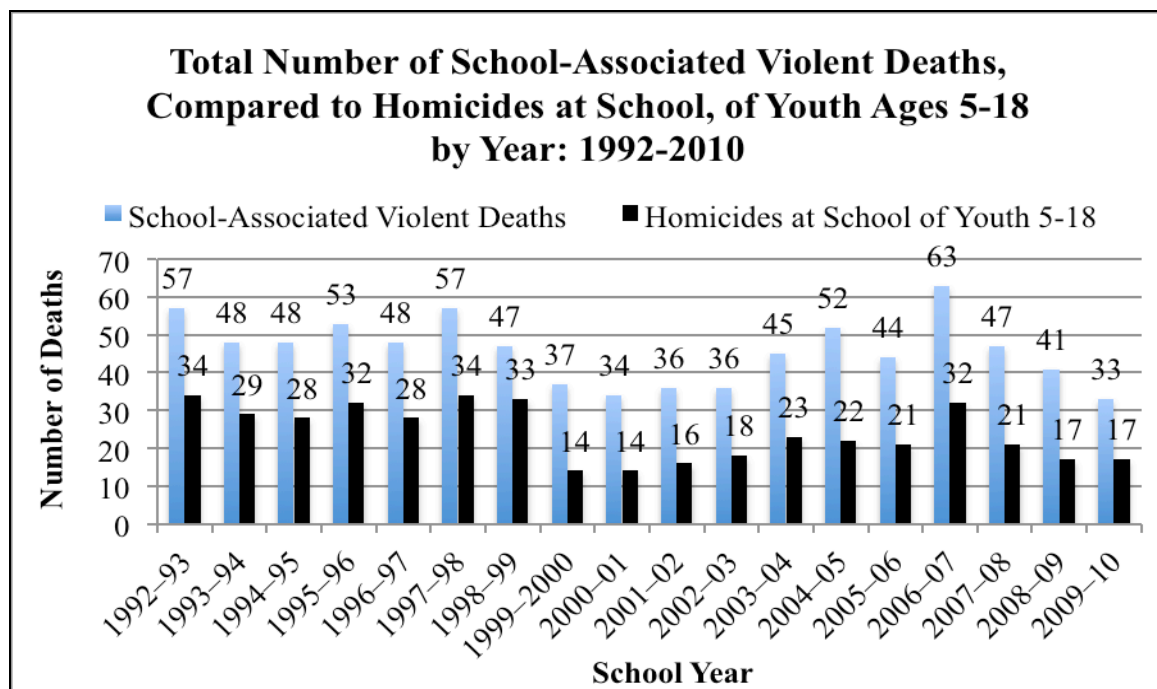
Data source: Robers et al. 2012:96. (NCES)

Although the rates of violent crimes are much lower than the rate of total crimes, even lower is the rate of school-associated violent deaths (see Figure 1.9). School-associated violent deaths are defined as “a homicide, suicide, or legal intervention (involving a law enforcement officer), in which the fatal injury occurred on the campus of a functioning elementary or secondary school the United States, while the victim was on the way to or from regular sessions at school or while the victim was attending or traveling to or from an official school-sponsored event” (Robers et al. 2012:95). The victims of a school-associated violent death include not only students, but also any others on school property, such as teachers, administrators, or other staff members. It is clear



that the number of school-associated deaths per year is low, and these rates have remained relatively stable throughout the years. Still, youth homicides occurring at school is a much smaller number. In fact, youth homicides occurring at school remained at less than 2% of the total number of youth homicides (Dinkes et al., 2007). Robers et al. (2012:iv) point out that there were 1579 homicides among 5-18 year olds in the 2008-2009 school year, yet only 17 of them occurred at school<sup>5</sup>.

**Figure 1.9 School-Associated Violent Deaths and Homicides**



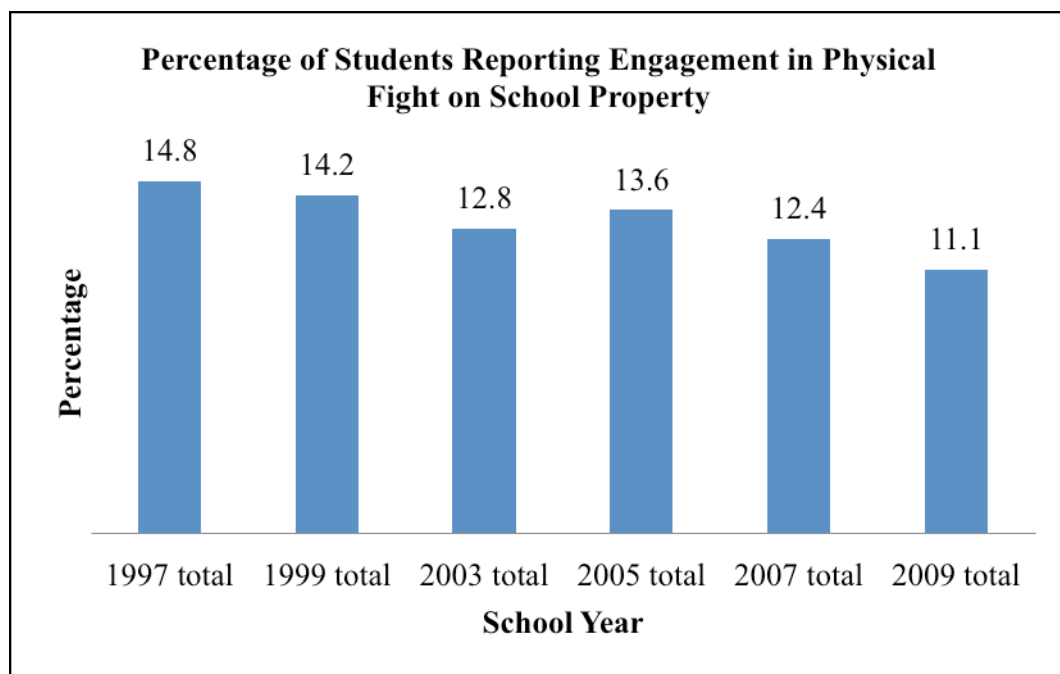
Data source: Robers et al. 2012:95. (NCES)

Other U.S. data, the *Digest of Education Statistics* from Snyder and Dillow (2011), evaluate the percentage of high school students (grade 9-12) who reported experience with violence on school property. The total number of students who reported

<sup>5</sup> Robers et al. (2012) consider the school building itself, the school property, the school bus, or travelling to- and from- school as being “at school”.

fighting on school property remained relatively stable over the years, with 11.1% of students at the lowest (in 2009) and 14.8% at the highest (in 1997) (see Figure 1.10).

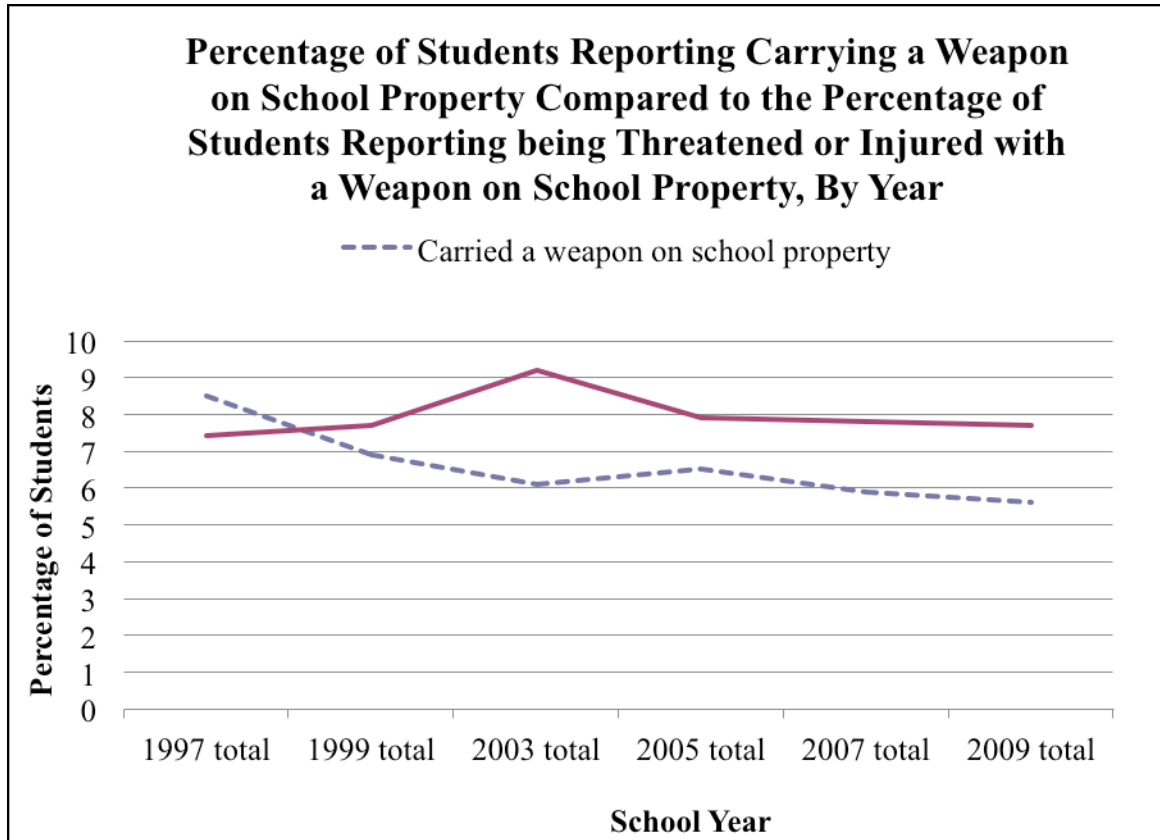
**Figure 1.10 Students Engaging in Physical Fights on School Property**



Data Source: Snyder and Dillow 2011:251. (NCES)

Similarly, the total percentage of students who reported being threatened or injured with a weapon on school property remained relatively stable over the 10 years, with the lowest reported percentage at 7.4%, and the highest at 9.2% (see Figure 1.11). It is clear that very few students (less than 10%) report carrying a weapon on school property, or being threatened with a weapon on school property. Thus, physical security measures which aim to reduce weapon carrying are implemented into schools based on very low levels of actual occurrence, and regardless of the fact that school violence trends either remain stable or are decreasing.

**Figure 1.11 Students Reporting Carrying Weapon Compared with Students Reporting Being Threatened or Injured with Weapon**



Data Source: Snyder and Dillow 2012:251. (NCES)

The overarching point is that schools are relatively safe places, especially considering that it is the place where thousands of students spend the majority of their time. As Gardner (2008) demonstrates:

In 1997-98, for every one young person killed in school, fifty-three were killed elsewhere. Six years later, for every one killing inside, there were seventy-five outside. The enormous size of America’s school population must also be considered. In 1997-98, there were about 52 million kids in school, and with a number that large it is inevitable that even the most fantastically rare danger will strike somewhere. The simple fact is, the average American student had a 0.00006 percent chance of being murdered at school in 1997-98. That’s 1 in 1,529,412. And the risk has shrunk since then. (Gardner 2008:210)

The chance of being murdered at school is extremely rare, and yet the public's perception, at least for certain periods after a highly publicized violent incident, is that school violence is much more frequent, pervasive, and exceptionally random. Schools respond to these public perceptions and implement policies and procedures; yet, even after the fear dissipates, the policies and procedures remain in effect. There is no clear evidence of any actual rise in the prevalence of school crime or violence; in fact, the data demonstrate either a reduction in trends, or stability at low levels of prevalence. Therefore, there is a sizeable gap between trends in school responses, and trends in school violence. In the next section I present the overarching hypotheses that may account for this disjuncture.

### **THIS STUDY: RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND HYPOTHESES**

Although school violence trends remain relatively stable or decreasing, school responses are becoming more frequent and more pervasive. Why are there numerous school policies and procedures about school crime and violence when their actual occurrence is quite low? And, why is there such a focus on school crime and violence when students report feeling safe at school? What accounts for this gap? The overarching research question guiding this research is:

**Q1:** What accounts for the gaps between perception, system responses, and actual prevalence of school crime and violence?

This leads to three additional research questions:

**Q1a:** Is school violence feared equally among all key players within the school system, regardless of their position within the school (e.g., student, teacher, administrator) or the school they attend? Namely, is fear influenced by ecological variation of crime and violence?

**Q1b:** Are responses to school crime and violence implemented consistently across all schools, regardless of the school's individual

risk for crime and violence (that is, regardless of ecological variation<sup>6</sup>), and if so, why?

**Q1c:** Do media reports accurately reflect the amount of school crime and violence that is occurring, or do the media disproportionately report on the most heinous acts of school violence (such as school shootings)?

There are three main hypotheses that address these research questions, and could explain why responses to school violence appear to be on the rise, though data on the problem itself demonstrate a decline:

**H1: Culture of Fear** – the disjuncture stems from an overarching fear, which is pervasive, consistent, decoupled from the “ecology” of school crime (to be defined below), and largely stems from the mass media.

**H2: Institutional Theory** – the gap stems from institutional processes whereby schools seek legitimacy and therefore reflect how centralized hierarchies respond to their institutional environment.

**H3: Confirmatory Bias** – scattered and sporadic events of school violence receive large-scale exposure, often through the media, through confirmatory bias processes. These mechanisms are able to not only generate and perpetuate a culture of fear, but can also serve to legitimate school policies, as it is easier to confirm perceptions of risk than to disconfirm them.

Hypothesis 1, the culture of fear hypothesis, is about cultural forces within the environment. It contends that fear is not a direct reflection of violence and crime occurring on school property, but that there are broader cultural influences at play.

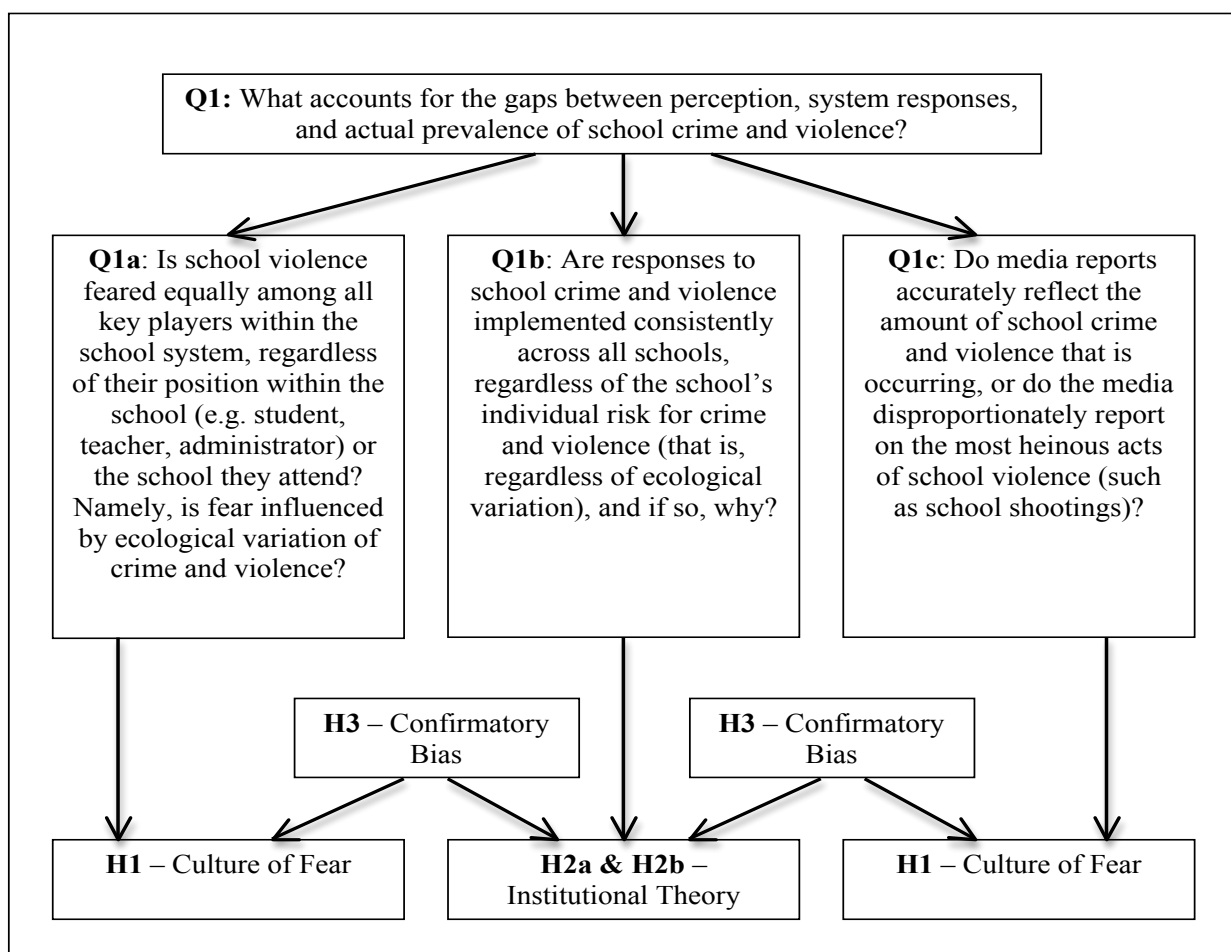
Hypothesis 2, the institutional theory hypothesis, addresses the organizational responses to these cultural forces. It explores how—and why—schools respond to these cultural forces. And, Hypothesis 3, the confirmatory bias hypothesis, focuses on the mechanisms that create the cultural forces addressed in Hypothesis 1 and perpetuate the organizational

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<sup>6</sup> As Rodney Stark (1987) argues, geographical and social factors are important characteristics of crime, and we must focus on “traits of places and groups rather than traits of individuals” (p. 894). Thus, ecologies of crime and ecological variation focus on the locations of crime and violence—for this dissertation, school locations—that experience higher risk of criminal or violent activities.

responses focussed on in Hypothesis 2. In essence, it explains that the gap between the perception of violence, the system-wide responses, and the measured prevalence in school crime and violence stems from our preconceptions: fear is relatively simple to confirm (for example, when the media report extensively on events of extreme violence), but is difficult to disconfirm. Figure 1.12, below, outlines how these research questions and hypotheses work together. These hypotheses, and the related research questions, theoretical constructs and methods that will be used to test them, will be elaborated further in the following chapters.

**Figure 1.12 Research Questions and Hypotheses**



## **BRIEF CONCLUSIONS**

In this chapter I have explored system responses to school crime and violence, public perceptions of school crime and violence, and statistical evidence on the prevalence of school crime and violence in order to demonstrate the problem: there is a disjuncture between perception, system responses and actual prevalence. In the remaining chapters I will explain what accounts for the gaps between perception, response and prevalence. In Chapter 2 I elaborate on the three main theories outlined in the hypotheses above: the culture of fear, institutional theory, and confirmatory bias. The mixed methodological approach used to address the aforementioned research questions and hypotheses are outlined in Chapter 3. In Chapter 4 I present a media content analysis of almost 2500 newspaper articles, and demonstrate how school crime and violence have been represented by the news media. Based on interview data and the media analyses presented in Chapter 4, Chapter 5 is an analysis of whether a culture of fear exists and the resultant implications. In Chapter 6 I turn toward schools' responses, using institutional theory to explain how schools respond to fear, perception, and actual events of school crime and violence. Finally, in Chapter 7 I recap the major findings from Chapters 4, 5 and 6, and provide a brief discussion and final conclusions.

**CHAPTER 2: THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS - THE CULTURE OF FEAR,  
INSTITUTIONAL THEORY, AND CONFIRMATORY BIAS**

In this chapter, I outline the three overarching theories that guide the main hypotheses; namely, the culture of fear, institutional theory, and confirmatory bias. Established in Chapter 1, it is evident that the prevalence of school crime and violence is relatively stable, and trends actually demonstrate a decline in prevalence, yet the numerous policies and procedures that schools have adopted over the past decade indicate that responses to school crime and violence are on the rise. Thus, the main question is: What accounts for the gaps between system responses, and actual prevalence of school crime and violence?

One potential answer to this question is that schools, as large bureaucratic organizations, respond to environmental trends in a rational or functional way. The bureaucratic organization of schools—running from large provincial ministries of education, to smaller and more centralized boards of education, to individual school administrators—is a rational and functional means of organization. Prerequisites, such as teacher training and certification, compulsory attendance, standardized testing, and age grading, are consistent among all schools which ensure that they appear legitimate. The rational bureaucratic organization serves as a signal of legitimacy and ensures that the function of schools is never questioned; schools are seen as functional because of this bureaucratic organization (Davies & Zarifa 2009; Scott 2003).

Theoretically, this leads to the expectation that there are close relationships (or tight-coupling) between ecological prevalence and organizational response (Arum 2000).



That is, schools should—rationally speaking—react to problems particular to their individual schools by implementing individual responses specific to those problems. In the case of school crime and violence, this would mean that policies should be implemented in the particular schools where the crime and violence is occurring.

However, as the overview of Ontario’s responses to school violence (found in Chapter 1) indicates, schools are responding to violence en masse, through governmentally mandated programs and policies, which is a loosely-coupled response and not a rational response to ecological prevalence. Thus, an alternative form of theorizing the problem is necessary.

This alternative form of theorizing leads from a rational approach to an institutional approach, whereby organizations imitate and replicate one another as they respond to external pressures. Often, this is a means of attaining and retaining their legitimacy. This process of imitation can, and does, lead to looser connections between the prevalence of a problem and the response to it, as “policy choices are based on fads, revered exemplars, or abstract theories, rather than solid evidence” (Dobbin, Simmons and Garrett 2007:451). Thus, institutional theory is better suited to explaining the organizational responses; namely, why schools’ responses are loosely connected to the actual prevalence of school crime and violence. Additionally, the culture of fear can also provide an explanation for why this gap occurs by examining the cultural forces at play that can lead to organizational responses. Still, confirmatory bias can aid the explanation by focussing on the mechanisms that create the cultural forces and perpetuate the organizational responses. The following section will outline this means of theorizing, detailing the culture of fear, institutional theory, and confirmatory bias.

## **WHAT IS A “CULTURE OF FEAR”?**

A culture of fear is more than just a general fear of crime. Fear is an emotional response to some type of tangible or material threat. Often, people are fearful of specific places, people, or events that could cause them or their loved ones harm. However, fearing an area of a city or a home burglary are aspects of more specific and individualised ‘fear of crime,’ and not a generalised and widespread ‘culture of fear’ (Smith & Pain 2009). The major differences between fear of crime and culture of fear are outlined in Table 2.1, below. A culture of fear exists when fear is only loosely related to material threat, and exists on a relatively broad scale. When a culture of fear is present, there is little variation in the perception of the risk at hand; that is, the fear is widespread, and not relegated solely to particular sections of society, particular types of incidents, or particular individuals. Further, fear of the event is perceived to be completely random: it can happen to anyone, at anytime, without warning. The fear is based on the perception of primordial danger—that there is a high risk of violence, injury, or death—and this danger is perceived to be pervasive, widespread, and unavoidable. When everyday behaviours and attitudes are no longer taken for granted, and when experiences that were once considered typical are now seen as being risky or dangerous, we have evolved into a culture of fear (Glassner 1999; Furedi 2002). Even though the events themselves are rare, the fear of the event occurring is grossly exaggerated and disproportionate to the real risk involved. The media’s emphasis on certain risks over others can help to shape the culture of fear as the public acquires a heightened sense of risk and danger. Because the fear is so pervasive—even though the individual level of risk is not—responses to the potential risk

become routinized and institutionalized (Glassner 1999; Furedi 2002). When these steps occur, a culture of fear is born.

**Table 2.1 Comparison of Fear of Crime and Culture of Fear**

<b>Fear of Crime</b>	<b>Culture of Fear</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Concentrated and individualized fear (e.g., personal crime or property crime)</li> <li>• Heightened fear resulting from direct or indirect victimization</li> <li>• Fear of personal victimization or others' victimization</li> <li>• Real fear, not hypothetical fear</li> <li>• Fear based on physical, social and situational vulnerability</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unspecified fear</li> <li>• Generalized fear</li> <li>• Random (or perceived to be)</li> <li>• Unqualified / invariant, rather than rare</li> <li>• Sustained anticipation of fear</li> <li>• Responses to fear are routinized / institutionalized</li> <li>• Fear is disproportionate to actual risk</li> </ul>

***Components of a Culture of Fear***

The founding fathers of the culture of fear thesis, Barry Glassner (1999) and Frank Furedi (2002) demonstrate the wide range of phenomena that this theory applies to, including school violence. However, to date the theory has not been empirically tested. Instead, Glassner and Furedi merely provide anecdotal evidence to demonstrate how many of the components of the culture of fear are applicable to numerous experiences, such as road rage, racialized groups and terrorism, airplane disasters, environmental devastation, and diseases such as cancer, to name a few. Although none of these fear-generating phenomena have been tested empirically, Glassner and Furedi provide anecdotal descriptions that outline the core components that are required to create a culture of fear.

***Minimal variation in perception of fear***

Tudor (2003) succinctly captures the definition of the culture of fear when he states that “although all fear is significantly moulded by its socio-cultural environments, fear experienced and articulated over an extended period is likely to be more open to socially patterned processes of reinforcement and routinisation, and it is such sustained anticipation of negative outcomes across time and space” (p. 241) that generate a culture of fear. Thus, when a particular fear—such as that of school crime and violence—is focused on over a period of time, it can evolve from a fear of crime into an overarching culture of fear. It is not the individual emotion of ‘fear’, per se, that underscores the culture of fear; instead, a ‘culture’ of fear is generated when the social conditions are organized around, or founded upon, this fear.

***Randomness***

Acts of extreme school violence, such as school shootings, are extremely rare events. For example, in Canadian history there have been 27 school shootings to date. Of these, less than half (12) involved fatalities (Howells, 2012). But it is events like school shootings—extremely rare, extremely violent, and seemingly random—that increase people’s fear, and can lead to a culture of fear about school crime and violence. Randomness indicates a lack of control and/or predictability, which makes people feel vulnerable (Eagle 2005).

Experts—such as policy makers and political pundits—dwell on *hypothetical* risks, emphasizing the randomness in which these risks can strike, providing the sense that ‘anything can happen’ (Furedi 2002). Thus, fear that an act of school crime or

violence could happen at any time, to anyone, at any school, becomes widespread.

Avoidance of these risks is often hypothetical as well. People adopt a ‘precautionary approach’ to their everyday lives, believing that it is better to be ‘safe than sorry’ in their daily actions and interactions. Thus, attaching the label ‘safe’ to policies and programs (e.g., the *Safe Schools Act*) is reassuring, yet it also serves as a reminder of the potential risks that can occur if risk avoidance measures are not constantly undertaken (Furedi 2002).

The random nature of school violence is often the greatest aspect that is emphasized by policy makers, politicians and the media. A prime example can be seen with this statement that was given after the Columbine school shooting: “If it can happen here, then surely people will recognize that they have to be alive to the possibility that it can occur in any community...” (The Associated Press 1999:D3). In itself, this quote demonstrates the emphasis of randomness that is perpetuated by experts. What is especially interesting is that this quote was taken directly from a White House Press Conference given by former U.S. President Bill Clinton. When an individual of such power proclaims that school violence can happen to anyone, at anytime, anywhere, the public is very likely to validate this claim by becoming fearful.

Another defining feature of the culture of fear is the belief that there are unknown, yet powerful forces capable of threatening and destroying our lives as we have come to know them (Furedi 2002). When the randomness of school violence is emphasized, it is not just the act itself that is seen as random; the perpetrator of the event is also portrayed as random. Thus, it is not merely fear of personal safety that is emphasized, but also fear

of all individuals that surround us. When claims like “We’ve got a great neighbourhood, but this stuff happens everywhere” (Foster April 21 1999:D3) are made, the public not only fears for their lives, but they begin to also fear the people around them.

***Pervasiveness***

“We live in a violent society” is often the reason provided when safety concerns seep into our everyday lives, and into areas that were not previously defined as ‘risky’. However, it is not clear whether society is actually more violent, or whether individuals are actually at a higher risk of danger than ever before. Many of these reactions are over-exaggerations, based on “statistically insignificant occurrences ... [that] stimulate nationwide anxiety and fear” (Furedi 2002:113). However, these reactions become so pervasive and intertwined with everyday lives, that the original incident that produced them in the first place is forgotten. Akiba et al. (2002) point out that National level statistics, such as those from the U.S. Department of Education and U.S. Department of Justice (2001), show that violence has been declining for at least a decade; yet researchers such as Hinds (2000) show that concern about violence—especially when it pertains to schools—has increased. Akiba et al. (2002) also point out that this discrepancy is not merely relegated to the United States, but can be seen in other countries as well. Robers et al. (2010) report that 3% of students ages 12-18 reported that they were afraid of attack or harm *away* from school and 5% reported they were afraid of attack or harm occurring *at* school.

Much of the fear of school violence is unfounded, Glassner (1999) claims, since children at American public schools experience fewer attacks, accidents and injuries at

school than they do in places where they spend time that are away from school. For example, as demonstrated in Chapter 1, less than 2% of homicides of all youth ages 5-18 occurred at school (Robers et al., 2010). Nevertheless, schools invest vast amounts of money into safety measures such as security cameras and metal detectors, regardless of the individual school's risk of violence or crime. This type of pervasive fear is an indicator of the culture of fear. However, widespread fear must be demonstrated to exist not only among schools, but also among key players within the schools (e.g., students, teachers, parents, administrators), and in the public.

### ***Exaggeration and Disproportion***

After reports of extreme school violence, such as a school shooting, calls to improve school safety abound. However, cries that 'something must be done' about school violence are often responses to perceptions rather than to objective realities (Sacco 2005). For example, the Columbine school shooting was considered to be an extremely violent yet anomalous event, and when other (still anomalous) school shootings followed there were cries that an 'epidemic' of school violence was underway. However, research demonstrated that generally, violent school deaths were rare occurrences, and that the overall numbers of violent school deaths and non-lethal violence at schools was actually decreasing (Best 2003; Sacco 2005). Thus, media hype perpetuated ideas of an 'epidemic', yet statistical and empirical evidence demonstrated the opposite. When school policies and practices to increase school safety are premised on this false epidemic, we see a disproportionate response that serves as an indicator of an overarching culture of fear.

When schools implement responses that greatly outweigh the risk for violence, or are seen as being extreme measures, the response is considered disproportionate. For example, in 1995, a state-of-the-art school was built in Dallas, Texas based on the principles of Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED), and cost 41 million dollars to build. The school contains 37 surveillance cameras, six metal detectors, five police officers, perimeter lights, and an eight-foot iron fence that surrounds it (Applebome 1995). Although this description reads less like a school and more like a prison, the school is being defended by Dallas officials as a necessary step to protect the students and its surrounding community.

### ***Media influence***

Although the media do not *cause* a heightened sense of risk, per se, their attention does focus and amplify it (Furedi 2002). The media serves to constantly remind us of, and reinforce, the potential and theoretical risks that we face (Furedi 2002). A news story that focuses on a rare or tragic event brings out numerous additional stories about the event itself, but also about the policy implementations that could result to avoid similar tragedies in the future, and about the practices that we should engage in to protect ourselves from experiencing a comparably tragic event. The event is turned into a life lesson in risk avoidance. For example, Furedi (2002) claims that:

Every time someone is afflicted with a terrible injury or dies tragically we search for some lessons that help illuminate the experience. The phrase ‘this must not be allowed to happen again’ expresses the belief that if we can learn the real meaning of a tragedy then similar adverse events can be avoided. Family members issue messages that outline the hope that something ‘good’ will come out of their relative’s tragic fate. Even a single unexpected accident is sufficient to provoke calls for more regulation and preventive measures. (P. 10)



This has come to light in southern Ontario with the tragic death of 15-year-old Jordan Manners, who was fatally shot in the hallway of his Toronto high school in May of 2007. Only a week after his death, the news media quoted his mother, Lorraine Small, begging “Please, don’t let my son die in vain” as she pleaded for an inquest into her son’s death (CityNews.ca 2007). Lorraine was also quoted as saying, “I feel like a celebrity, with all the cameras ... will I still be a celebrity a month from now, a year from now?” (CityNews.ca 2007), essentially requesting that neither she nor her son be forgotten. This is the “parent-cum-celebrity” that Glassner (1999:63) identifies as a particularly influential group of people within the culture of fear. Their influence partly stems from the political and legislative activity that results from their claims, which serve as institutional memorials for their deceased children. These institutional memorials can spark institutional measures, including school policy changes, and the implementation of structural responses and cultural responses.

### *Institutionalized responses*

Another indicator of the culture of fear comes exists when “the demand for the institutionalization of security in new spheres of social life [comes from] basic existential securities” (Furedi 2002:114). The culture of fear is not merely the characteristics that exist in the social environment; it also refers to the concrete decisions and actions that are undertaken in response to this fear (Yearwood 2003).

When school violence is seen as random and pervasive, it legitimizes structural and cultural changes to the school. For example, structural changes such as increased surveillance through security guards, security cameras, and emergency communication

systems—all of which have substantial financial costs associated with them—are legitimized in order to reduce the perceived risk of school crime and violence. Cultural changes such as the introduction of new programs (e.g., Character Education; Restorative Justice), practicing lockdown procedures, and requiring school uniforms—all of which have social costs associated with them—are legitimized in order to reduce the seeming randomness associated with school crime and violence. However, these changes can affect the school climate and actually *increase* the tension and fear (Herda-Rapp 2003). Thompkins (2000) points out that these cultural and structural measures “suggest to students and teachers that they learn and teach in a violent environment where students cannot be trusted and are under suspicion” (p. 65). As such, the changes that are claimed to reduce fear can serve as a means of perpetuating a culture of fear. It is therefore important to explore how the structural and cultural responses have affected key players within the school system.

Furedi (2002) provides an example of the culture of fear on University campuses that came to light during the 1980s. American campuses were seen as dangerous places to be as a result of a small number of violent incidents. The widespread fear that stemmed from these few incidents led to the monitoring and regulation of alcoholic beverages on campus, mandatory educational crime prevention and safety programs, emergency alert systems (such as emergency telephones and alarms), and safety patrollers in the form of students and formal authorities. This has also led to legislative activity, including the *Crime Awareness and Campus Security Act of 1990*, where Universities are legally required to report certain security policies and crime statistics (Furedi 2002). The fear, as

well as the structural and cultural responses, stemmed from the general atmosphere of the campus and not from any actual physical danger:

Research suggests that perceptions of danger diverge sharply from the incidence of physical violence. In fact, the results of one study showed that campus rates of both violent crime and property crime have been falling, especially since 1985. Moreover, it showed that students were significantly safer on campus than in the cities and communities surrounding them. (Furedi 2002:123)

This last statement is key: it is important to determine whether fear of school crime and violence exists regardless of the crime and violence in the communities that the schools are housed in, and regardless of whether the schools are defined as ‘high risk’ or ‘low risk’ for crime and violence. If fear is persistent and prevalent within all types of schools, and all types of communities, then a culture of fear exists. Further, if all schools, regardless of their perceived risk, institutionalize the structural and cultural responses to school crime and violence then a culture of fear may exist.

### ***Sources of a Culture of Fear – The Mass Media***

For the most part, individuals exist in a relatively small section of the physical and social environment. We live in one place, we attend one school, we go to work at one place, we see the same people—our friends, family, and coworkers—and we travel the same routes along the way. Therefore, individuals frequently use news media reports to garner an understanding of the broader social world that exists outside of the spheres of our day-to-day interactions. The information we receive is assembled by journalists, as individuals and as employees, who have their own agenda of readership and economic self-interest. Essentially, the news both constructs and mediates our social reality, while simultaneously playing into the publics’ fears (Herda-Rapp 2003). The press has the

ability to create a story, categorize it within the realm of ‘crime’ or ‘violence’, speculate about its causes, and propose myriad social, political and cultural solutions to this purported problem (Barker and Petley 1997). However, the news media cannot determine exactly *what* a reader will perceive or believe to be true, because individuals are influenced by more than merely what they read. Instead, journalists can suggest to their audiences what to think *about*, and *how* to think about it. In this manner, the media play an agenda-setting function by influencing what their consumers think about (Greenberg and Wilson 2006; Herda-Rapp 2003). The press are able to influence the salience of topics so that certain issues are focussed on more than others, which eventually become the focus of public opinion, consideration, and dialogue. Previous research has demonstrated that exposure to news media can provide people with important fact-based information, but the way information is emphasized and presented can influence the perceived importance of the topic at hand (McCombs and Reynolds 2002). Although the media has less influence in changing our immediate perceptions, over time their influence can have an impact.

Luckily, most individuals rarely experience significant violence or crime in their own lives, and their only encounter with it is in a second-hand way: through the mass media. Even in high-crime areas, individuals may only have secondary experience with violence or crime, either as witnesses or through visual cues (e.g., broken windows, graffiti, etc.). Therefore, it is logical to assume that the manner in which the media selects and portrays crime can facilitate public assumptions about the pervasiveness of crime and violence (Roshier 1973:28). In high-crime areas, the media serve to reiterate experiences

of crime and violence, and reinforce their existence. Although we are dependent on how the news media presents the facts to us, we must remember that the social reality that is created by the media does not exist in a vacuum: the news media does not either distort or reflect reality, but is intertwined in the reality that it is a part of creating (Barker and Petley 1997; Fishman 1980).

The long-standing logic that journalists utilize in the creation of a news story is summed up by the phrase ‘if it bleeds, it leads’. Thus, stories that contain extremely violent behaviours often take precedence within the newspaper, but can lead to a distorted picture of violence and crime that encourages the public’s fear (Yanich 2005). Since it is the article’s headline that catches the readers’ attention, headlines are often exaggerated or overemphasized in order to attract and maintain this attention. Extremely violent behaviours are often highlighted for this very reason (Menifield et al. 2001). Numerous studies have admonished the media for their disproportionate, exaggerated, and even deceptive representations of crime and violence (for examples, see Marsh 1989 and Lotz 1991); however the media seem reluctant to produce any information that runs contrary to their economic self-interest (Cantor 2000:30). And, since “the consequence of news is more news” (Fishman 1980:11), they are not likely to change their methods any time soon.

Many researchers have demonstrated the links between media reports and public perceptions of crime, violence and fear. In fact, “media reporting of crime is immediate, dramatic, and free of historical perspective and therefore leads to exaggerated fear of crime” (Conklin 1975:22). For example, Beckett (1994) showed that public concern of

‘street crime’ was heightened due to media attention on the topic. Liska and Baccaglioni (1990) demonstrated that when newspapers covered stories on local crime, the fear of crime was heightened; however, when newspapers covered stories on nonlocal crime (national and international), the fear of crime was reduced. Thus, fear of crime was shaped by the type of crime news covered, not just the amount of coverage (Herda-Rapp 2003:547). Lotz (1991) claims that in American newspapers, murder is reported much more frequently than more banal crimes such as property crimes, even though murder is one of the rarest types of crimes to occur. Journalists focus on novelty—“news means new, out of the ordinary” (Lotz 1991:9)—which means that their reports are not an accurate reflection of the actual occurrences in society. This is one reason why Glassner (1999) claims that “any analysis of the culture of fear that ignored the news media would be patently incomplete” (p. xxii).

Herda-Rapp (2003) claims that for average readers, the perception that there is greater propensity for violence among today’s kids [is] reinforced by the press through interviews with the “person on the street.” Such news conventions might produce “news,” but because the individual is usually not speaking from a position of authority or knowledge, the effect is a heightened and distributed – almost random – sense of risk. Such descriptions of those from whom violence is *not* expected imply that violence *is* expected from someone else. That the violence does come from this unexpected person, then, distributes the risk for the reader, making it a “real” threat to all. (P. 567)

Thus, the media’s framing of crime stories can play a role in the creation of a culture of fear. This seemingly random violence can heighten the concern of stakeholders—policy makers, school boards, administrators, and parents—as they question the safety of their students and fear for their own safety and wellbeing (Best 1999). As there is increased

focus on crime and violence, it begins to appear not only random, but also inevitable and persistent. Further, the prevalence of stories on youth crime and violence, and school crime and violence, can falsely demonstrate that acts of crime and violence are increasing or persistent, which can lead to disproportionate or exaggerated claims about crime rates. In sum, it is pertinent to examine the role that the media plays in the creation or dissemination of the culture of fear. A summary of the conditions that must be present for a culture of fear to exist is presented below, in Table 2.2.

**Table 2.2 Summary of Conditions for Culture of Fear**

<b>Conditions That Must Be Present if Culture of Fear Exists</b>	
Minimal Variation in Perception of Fear	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consistent amounts of fear reported, <i>regardless of individuals' position within the school.</i></li> <li>• Consistent amounts of fear reported, <i>regardless of the school attended.</i></li> </ul>
Randomness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fear that all individuals, at all schools, are potential <i>victims.</i></li> <li>• Fear that all students, at all schools, are potential <i>perpetrators.</i></li> </ul>
Pervasiveness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Safety measures based on perceived risk or fear, not actual violence incidents.</li> </ul>
Exaggeration and Disproportion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Protective measures outweigh actual risk of violence.</li> <li>• Claims of “epidemic” levels of violence.</li> </ul>
Media Influence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focus on most violent acts (i.e. school shooting), or grieving individuals (“parent-cum-celebrity”).</li> <li>• Leads to political and legislative activity to curb problem.</li> </ul>
Institutionalized Responses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Safety measures implemented at all schools, regardless of school’s level of risk.</li> </ul>

### *Testing the Culture of Fear*

The aforementioned components and sources must all be present for a culture of fear to exist. Hypothesis 1 states that the disjuncture stems from an overarching fear, which is pervasive, consistent, decoupled from the ecology of school crime, and largely stems from the mass media. Now that the components and sources of the culture of fear have been explicated, additional, testable hypotheses can be generated. Namely:

**H1a:** Fear should be pervasive across school jurisdictions (across different schools and different stakeholders in school hierarchies), with little ecological variation by actual prevalence of school violence.

**H1b:** Participants should fear that violence will occur randomly, rather than predictably, as in ecologies of crime.

**H1c:** Media reports of school crime should be highly prevalent and sensationalist.

The methods that will be used to test these hypotheses are outlined in Chapter 3.

However, the culture of fear is likely not the only explanation that accounts for the gap between the perception and the prevalence of school crime and violence. Institutional theory provides an additional—not antithetical—means of understanding the gap that exists between school violence trends and the schools’ responses to the problem.

### **INSTITUTIONAL THEORY**

Both the culture of fear and institutional theory are cultural in nature. However, institutional theory has the added advantage of being able to capture institutional and organizational processes at work. It is applicable to the study of school crime and violence since educational organizations are highly institutionalized organizations. The culture of fear and institutional theory are not competing theoretical approaches: the culture of fear theory focuses on culture in a way that is extremely relevant to issues of



school crime and violence, while institutional theory has particular organizational components that are exceptionally relevant for exploring processes as they occur in schools.

School systems have been a key socializing component of society for decades, and although they constantly undergo changes, they are all essentially similar in structure. Within the province of Ontario, the Ontario Ministry of Education is the governing board that presides over all publicly funded schools and school boards. As the province's educational ruling body, they create and disseminate discourses to their member schools, providing myriad rules and regulations, policies and procedures that the schools must follow.

### ***Rationalized Institutional Myths***

According to institutional theory, organizations must conform to the expectations and desires of their institutional environments and reflect the values and beliefs of their surrounding societies. However, organizations do not conform to their institutional environments entirely; instead, they adopt rationalized myths which then become institutionalized and regarded as a 'truth' within the organization. An institutional myth is essentially a complex relationship of symbolic associations and representations of meaning (Colomy 1998). Members of the organization, as well as members of the surrounding environment, adopt these myths as truths and 'buy-in' to them. Because the institutional environment accepts these myths, they provide the organization with their support, faith, and trust, thereby providing the institution with legitimacy. Legitimacy is key to the survival of the organization.

There are two key properties surrounding the myths of organizations. First, they serve to identify the technical purposes of the organization and delineate the proper means of achieving these technical purposes, and they do so in a highly rationalized, impersonal, and rule-like manner. For example, when schools implement programs to combat violence, they are presented to the school in a top-down manner stemming from either the Ministry of Education or from the local school board, often as a legally mandated intervention. Second, due to their institutionalization, these myths function separately of individuals and even separately of the organization itself, thereby removing any discretion and becoming taken-for-granted notions of legitimacy (Meyer and Rowan 1977).

One process that generates rationalized myths of organizations is the institutional environment that surrounds the organization, which serves to provide relational networks: “The myths generated by particular organizational practices and diffused through relational networks have legitimacy based on the supposition that they are rationally effective” (Meyer and Rowan 1977:347). There are two dimensions that serve to shape the environment surrounding the organization. First, organizations influence the aforementioned relational networks to coerce them into adapting to the organization’s structures and relations. Second, the organization itself—specifically powerful organizations, such as a school or school board—attempts to integrate their goals and their procedures into the environment that surrounds them by producing institutional rules (Meyer and Rowan 1977). Organizations must prove to their institutional environment that they are acting in an appropriate manner and for a collectively valued purpose in

order to retain legitimacy and public support. To prove this, organizations often design and conform to a formal structure that remains congruent with the myths derived from the institutional environment (Meyer and Rowan 1977). In the case of school responses to violence, the guidelines of *Bill 81* and *Bill 212* (as outlined in Chapter 1) are prime examples of this formal structure; discretion about disciplinary procedures is removed from the administrator, and in its place is a list of infractions that may result in suspension or expulsion. This formal structure demonstrates the institutional rules that the organization is purporting to uphold. In order for the constituents of the institutional environment to ‘buy-in’ to these myths, they must be able to comprehend and relate to them, and must agree with their importance, their pertinence, and their necessity.

### ***Legitimacy***

Social institutions maintain their authority and legitimacy through institutionalized myths, which also legitimate the institutional rules and scripts created by the organization. These institutional myths correspond to the products, the services, the policies and the programs of organizations and institutions, some of which are often only ceremonially adopted by the organization (Meyer and Rowan 1977; McMullen 1994). Thus, the formal structures of an institution are often only attempts at reflecting the institutional myths and therefore legitimating the formal structures themselves (McMullen 1994). Frequently, this occurs at the expense of technical efficiency. In order to achieve public support and therefore retain legitimacy, institutional organizations must appear to be in accordance with the needs and demands of their external environments. If the organization does not retain a façade of competence and legitimacy, or if it markedly differs from what the

popular conception perceives that the organization should look like, the organization could be penalized for violation, and risk organizational death.

In order to retain legitimacy and public support, organizations must prove to their institutional environment that they are acting, or responding to a problem, in an appropriate manner and for a collectively valued purpose. If the organization fails to do so, it could be penalized for violation and risk organizational death. To demonstrate that they are responding appropriately, organizations often design and conform to a formal structure that adheres to the pressures of their institutional environment (Meyer and Rowan 1977). Thus, organizations face a dual challenge: they must attain and retain technical practicality, as well as upholding normative legitimacy (Dill 1994). For example, schools will institute policies and programs against violence, and even if these policies and programs are not extensively integrated into their daily practices their reported implementation serves to placate members of the institutional environment. Essentially, this formal structure demonstrates the institutional rules that the organization is purporting to uphold. In order for the constituents of the institutional environment to ‘buy-in’, they must be able to comprehend and relate to them, and must agree with their importance, their pertinence, and their necessity. The organization must reflect the socially constructed reality of the environments that surround them, and structure themselves in accordance with the phenomena that surround them, engaging in ceremonial compliance with the needs and wants of their surrounding environment. These organizations are constantly involved with their surrounding environments, and do not

function as entities entirely separate and distinct from one another (Meyer and Rowan 1977).

### ***Loose Coupling***

In this type of institutional environment, the organization must conform to externally defined rules and normative requirements, in order to gain the public support and prestige necessary for legitimacy and survival (Dill 1994). However, organizations may find it difficult to maintain legitimacy and to conform to rational myths and normative elements. If the organization must undergo evaluation and scrutiny, they run the risk of losing their legitimacy. In order to avoid evaluation and inspection, organizations employ two strategies: decoupling, and the logic of confidence (Meyer and Rowan 1977). Organizations often ‘buffer’ their technical activities and their formal structures in order to maintain their ceremonial conformity and conform to their rationalized myths. Their formal structure, or the institutional rules they purport to uphold and utilize, are ‘loosely coupled’ or ‘decoupled’ from the actual work and activities they engage in (Meyer and Rowan 1977). Schools are often considered the exemplary model of a loosely coupled system, as teachers have autonomy over their individual classrooms (in terms of instructional and disciplinary activities), with little inter-dependence among other classrooms and staff (Weick 1976).

Many institutional organizations have formal structures that serve as a reflection of the myths of the institutional environment, as opposed to reflecting the real and actual demands of their work environment (Meyer and Rowan 1977). This ultimately allows the organization to display their conformity to normative regulations while maintaining their

autonomy and independence; for example, teachers are often provided with ambiguous and flexible standards, allowing them to meet various and sometimes contradictory goals (Fox and Harding 2005). It also allows more leeway and freedom for the organization to adjust to the environmental demands and specifications without risking loss of support or legitimacy (Dill 1994).

Rules and beliefs are often ‘rationalized’ by emphasizing the positive relationship between the means and the ends; one must follow the rules, or adhere to the beliefs in order to garner the desired end goals, as they are outlined by the institution. Further, these rules and beliefs can be considered mythical since they are often taken-for-granted as ‘truth’, even though they lack empirical evidence to demonstrate them as such (Dill 1994). Institutional environments frequently seek support and legitimacy through the building of trust and cooperation of members of the institutional environment by adhering to their institutionalized myths. These are, therefore, less formalized relationships, which allow the organization to avoid assessment, evaluation, or inspection; instead, they rely on the trust and goodwill of their constituents to ‘stand by them’ and continually provide them with support and legitimacy and, in return, the institution will continue to perpetuate its rationalized myths to their public (Dill 1994). Essentially, institutions hold sets of cultural and social rules that provide meaning to cultural and social activity by means of regulating and regimenting them in a structured, formal, and patterned way. Therefore, the process of institutionalization involves the creation of these rules as not actually rules or regulations, per se, but as taken-for-granted processes and procedures of everyday life (McMullen 1994).

### *Language*

Language is also important to an organization, in order for them to remain ceremonially compliant with their institutional environments. The organizational language functions as a ‘vocabulary of motive’, or a ‘vocabulary of structure’. These vocabularies must outline the organizational goals, policies, and procedures in terminology that comply with the institutional rules in order for the environment to accept the organization as both rational and legitimate. Using the correct terminology and vocabulary can change organizational functions into valuable services, and can adhere the commitments of those involved within the organization, as well as members of the communities surrounding the organization (Meyer and Rowan 1977). Rationalized myths function to both purport and uphold the claims of the institution that the institutional environment will then ‘buy-in’ to. The organization articulates these institutionalized myths through myriad discourses, and stipulates how these myths will represent effective or desired means of achieving the positive and useful end goal. By incorporating the institutionalized myths into the language of the organization, the institutional entrepreneurs are essentially utilizing a ‘vocabulary of motives’ that their institutional environment will respond to. This vocabulary of motives serves to legitimate their institution, as well as to garner the resources needed to maintain legitimacy and public support (Meyer and Rowan 1977; Colomy 1998).

Neoinstitutionalists often focus more on structural constraints and cognitive processes, rather than the socialization process or rational choice theories (McMullen 1994). They tend to concentrate on how individuals learn institutional myths such as

“taken-for-granted scripts, habits, routines, rules, and conventional menus and categories of action” (McMullen 1994:710). Neoinstitutionalists view these rules, scripts, and routines as outside of the individuals themselves, instead subsumed by institutions who utilize their legitimacy and authority to perpetuate myths of how the institution functions or, on a much more general scale, how the world works (McMullen 1994).

### ***Testing Institutional Theory***

Although institutional theory has been used to examine school processes, it has not been used to examine school disorder or school safety issues. The advantage of this theoretical approach is that since institutional theory predicts and expects loose-coupling, it is an especially useful approach to examine the gap between school violence trends and the schools’ responses to the problem. As stated in Hypothesis 2, the gap may stem from institutional processes whereby schools seek legitimacy and therefore reflect how centralized hierarchies respond to their institutional environment. In this case, actual fear takes a more loosely-coupled form, and can be sensitive to ecological variation.

Additionally,

**H2a:** External, system-wide responses are implemented as a legitimacy seeking function, and are not reflective of patterns of fear.

**H2b:** Actual implementation of external, system-wide responses takes a loosely coupled form.

The methods that will be used to test these hypotheses are outlined in Chapter 3.

### **CONFIRMATORY BIAS**

Overall, there appears to be a sizeable gap between reactions to school crime and violence and actual data on them, which suggests that important cultural and organizational processes may be at work. The culture of fear theory attempts to address



these cultural processes, and institutional theory attempts to account for these organizational processes. However, there is one additional theory that bridges the cultural and organizational: a social-psychological theory referred to as confirmatory bias.

Confirmatory bias occurs when individuals misinterpret newly acquired information as support for their previously held beliefs, or their own hypotheses about a topic or situation (Pratto and John 1991; Nickerson 1998; Rabin and Schrag 1999; Martindale 2005; Kosnik 2008). Therefore, “a person suffers from confirmatory bias if he [or she] tends to misinterpret ambiguous evidence as confirming his [or her] current hypotheses about the world” (Rabin and Schrag 1999:38). Within psychology, a classic example used to illustrate this concept involves teacher evaluation of students. Once a teacher has formed an initial impression regarding a student’s skill level, additional evidence about that student’s skills, such as an assignment or essay, serves as support for the teacher’s initial impression. Thus, the student’s work—whether positive or negative—is interpreted by the teacher as confirmation of their initial opinion (Dougherty, Turban, and Callender 1994; Rabin and Schrag 1999; Kosnik 2008).

This is not to say that individuals always explicitly and consciously build a case to support their opinions, or outright reject contradictory evidence. Instead, confirmation bias is “a less explicit, less consciously one-sided case-building process” that includes the “unwitting selectivity in the acquisition and use of evidence” (Nickerson 1998:175-176). Central to the concept is the idea that the individual is unaware and unintentional in their bias (Nickerson 1998). Research on confirmatory bias suggests that the phenomenon is quite prevalent—more so than one might expect (Martindale 2005).

Baumeister et al. (2001) demonstrate that when evaluating evidence about one's opinions, "bad is stronger than good"; that is, negative events have a greater impact than similar positive events. For example, events such as losing money, losing friends, or experiencing criticism has a greater impact on an individual than gaining money, gaining friends or being praised. Additionally, negative information receives more attention than positive information, and contributes more to an individual's overall impression of an event or person (Baumeister et al. 2001). Therefore, events involving school crime and violence (such as a fight) would likely receive more attention, and exert more influence over individuals than a positive event (such as a fundraiser) at the same school.

Finkenauer and Rime (1998) found that when recalling emotional events, individuals tend to report bad emotional events more frequently than good emotional events, indicating that events involving negative emotions are more prominent in individuals' memories. If recall for emotional events favours the negative, this could indicate that when thinking about school safety, events of extreme violence (such as high profile school shootings) may come to the forefront. In addition to negative emotional events, negative behaviours are also recalled more frequently than positive behaviours, at both extreme and moderate levels (Skowronski and Carlston 1987; Bless, Hamilton, and Mackie 1992).

When presented with the need to process new information, individuals may engage in the perceptual and cognitive process of anchoring, where information that is either wrong or unimportant is presented in a way that gives it prominence: "Information that is perceptually and cognitively prominent functions as a reference point (an anchor)

and is used in the processing of other information” (Martindale 2005:35). For example, when the media report on heinous acts of violence, they often link the report to previous high-profile violent events, such as referring to the Columbine or Virginia Tech school shootings. These events serve as anchors for the reader, even if the connections between the two events are relatively minimal. Thus, the media can influence individuals’ perceptions by presenting these anchors. Additionally, the tone of the media’s presentation can affect perceptions, as risk perception research has demonstrated that negative risk messages (outlining potential risks) are often trusted more than positive risk messages (outlining relative safety, or the absence of risk) (Slovic 1993; Siegrist and Cvetkovich 2001; White et al. 2003).

When an event occurs, individuals often respond to it in regard to their preconceived notions. For example, Plous (1991) examined respondents’ reactions to a nuclear power accident, and found that the reactions coincided with the individuals’ preconceptions about nuclear power: if the respondent favoured the use of nuclear power, they saw the accident as being minor, and elaborated that the safety precautions had worked to minimize the damage; however, if the respondent opposed nuclear power, they saw the accident as nearly catastrophic, and elaborated that governmental mismanagement of nuclear reactors was the cause of the accident. Thus, it can be assumed that individuals who perceive schools to be relatively safe places would interpret acts of school crime and violence to be rare, anomalous instances, whereas individuals who perceive schools to be dangerous places would interpret the same acts to be evidence of looming danger.

Nickerson (1998) demonstrates that confirmation bias can allow people to see what they are looking for. More specifically, he claims that “people sometimes see in data the patterns for which they are looking, regardless of whether the patterns are really there” (p. 181). This could partially explain the existing gap between reactions to school crime and violence and actual data on them. Actual data—such as National statistical evidence—of the relatively low prevalence school crime and violence may be unintentionally ignored; instead, focus may center on high-profile, yet infrequent, events of school crime and violence. The desire for consistency may influence how individuals process new data:

... the tendency to treat data selectively and partially is a testament to the high value people attach to consistency. If consistency between beliefs and evidence were of no importance, people would have no reason to guard beliefs against data that are inconsistent with them ... Paradoxically, it seems that the desire to be consistent can be so strong as to make it difficult for one to evaluate new evidence pertaining to a stated position in an objective way. (Nickerson 1998:197)

Therefore, individuals may notice or remember behaviours that they expect. At the student level, this can mean that if a teacher or a student believes another student to be dangerous, violent, or ‘bad,’ then additional behaviours that are violent, dangerous or negative will serve to strengthen those preconceived notions. Once a student has been categorized as either ‘bad’ or ‘good,’ evidence that supports the categorization will be focused on more so than evidence that refutes it.

Stereotyping—believing that characteristics particular to one individual apply to other individuals who are members of the same group (religious, ethnic, friendship, etc.)—is related to confirmatory bias. The perception that group membership correlates

with behaviour may be true in some instances, but is often an erroneous assumption.

However, when rare behaviours occur within distinctive groups, it is often remembered more easily than similar behaviours by individuals who are not a part of that distinctive group (Hamilton, Dugan, and Trolier, 1985; Feldman, Camburn, and Gatti 1986).

Therefore, “once a person is convinced that members of a specific group behave in certain ways, he or she is more likely to seek and find evidence to support the belief than evidence to oppose it, somewhat independently of the facts” (Nickerson 1998:183). This can directly affect student groups within the school: at the class level, if one or two students are prone to engaging in negative behaviours, teachers may label that class or grade as being ‘bad’ or ‘troublesome’. Thus, if any student within that grade or class behaves inappropriately, the behaviour may be regarded as evidence that the class actually *is* bad. At the school level, a school’s negative reputation may be confirmed by anomalous events. For example, if a school has a reputation of being dangerous, any act of violence—especially acts that are more severe—can serve to confirm the negative reputation.

Nickerson (1998) claims that people’s beliefs can determine how they perceive and interpret incidents, especially with regard to instances of aggression. For example, if a student has been victimized or bullied, they may be more likely to see typical student interactions as being bullying behaviours than a student who has not been bullied or victimized. Thus, if two students within the same class or same school are asked about the prevalence of bullying or violence, their interpretations may differ based on their prior experiences with bullying and victimization.

Baumeister et al. (2001) argue that since bad events have a lasting effect, while good events have only a temporary effect, bad events serve as a signal for change. Thus, they argue that progress is often facilitated by bad events. Additionally, they demonstrate that attention toward the bad is evolutionarily adaptive; in order to survive, greater attention must be paid to possible bad or dangerous outcomes over good or positive outcomes (Pratto and John 1991; Baumeister et al. 2001). In essence, potential costs are more influential than potential gains. Thus, the implementation of policies to prevent school crime and violence may be influenced by dangerous events, even if the occurrence of these events is relatively rare.

Confirmatory bias also works in the process of policy justification. For example, once the government has committed itself to the adoption and implementation of a policy, additional incidents serve to support and justify this policy (Tuchman 1984, as cited in Nickerson 1998). This can apply to the adoption and implementation of school violence policies: after a policy has been implemented (such as the mandatory practice of lockdown procedures), events that occur which relate to the policy will most likely be regarded as positive support for the usefulness of the policy. However, decisions or policies that rule out the occurrence of certain types of events may exclude evidence that goes against, or is unrelated to the policy, which is then taken as evidence in *support* of the policy (Nickerson 1998). For example, if a school were to have metal detectors at all entranceways, this theoretically eliminates the possibility of guns or knives entering the school. If this school completes a year with no violent events involving knives or guns, they may claim that the implementation of metal detectors has been successful. However,

even without the presence of metal detectors, the school may still have had a year with no violent events involving knives or guns. Although having a year with no violent events involving guns or knives does not prove the usefulness of metal detectors, confirmatory bias theory predicts that it would be taken as positive evidence for the policy's utility.

### ***Testing Confirmatory Bias***

The third hypothesis to be tested in this dissertation relates to confirmatory bias:

**H3:** Scattered and sporadic events of school violence receive large-scale exposure, often through the media, through confirmatory bias processes. These mechanisms are able to not only generate and perpetuate a culture of fear, but can also serve to legitimate school policies, as it is easier to confirm perceptions of risk than to disconfirm them.

This hypothesis will be tested in conjunction with the culture of fear and the institutional theory hypotheses. Confirmatory bias theory addresses both organizational process and cultural processes. It can account for micro differences in the perception of school crime and violence, such as addressing why some individuals may fear for their safety at school even though others feel perfectly safe. Simultaneously, it can address the reasoning behind macro organizational processes, including the institutionalization of school safety policies. In general, confirmatory bias theory bridges the cultural and organizational, and may account for the gap between reactions to school crime and violence and actual data on them.

### **CONCLUDING THOUGHTS**

The answer to the curious gap that exists between the perception and the prevalence of school violence and crime may be that a culture of fear exists. However, even if a culture of fear does not exist, schools nevertheless are implementing structural

responses such as security cameras and hall monitors, even though the actual prevalence of school crime and violence—according to National crime statistics—is quite low. Thus, institutional theory allows for an examination of the organizational and institutional actions that schools are undertaking to address the problem. In either case, confirmatory bias may play a role in individuals' perceptions of school crime and violence, and may account for the gap. Whether the fear of school crime and violence is real or perceived, it is important to examine how schools are responding to it, and their reasons for doing so.

Although any of these three theoretical explanations could suffice on their own, there is an important relationship among them. Namely, cultures of fear can emerge in broader public spheres, and are often disseminated through the media and/or political arenas; policy effects are reactions to these environmental influences, but are simultaneously shaped by key organizational and/or institutional processes; and confirmatory bias processes are often the mechanisms by which scattered and sporadic acts of school violence receive large scale exposure, thereby not only generating cultures of fear, but also serving to legitimate policy. Thus, taken together they provide a holistic examination of the gap between the perception and prevalence of school crime and violence.



### CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

This project questions why responses to school violence appear to be on the rise, although data on the problem itself demonstrate a decline. There are three main hypotheses to account for this gap:

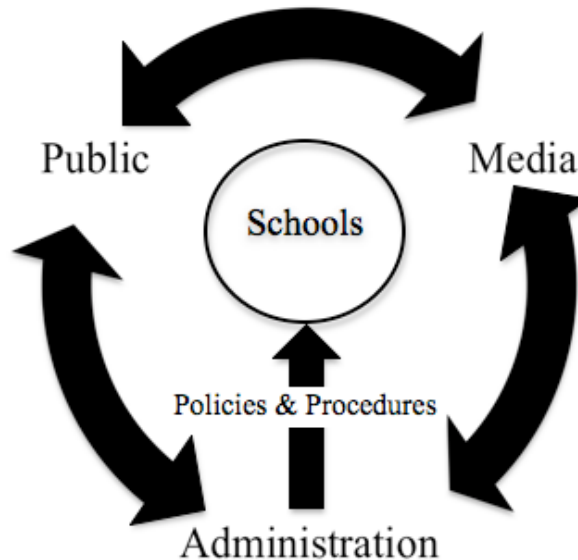
**H1: Culture of Fear** – the disjuncture stems from an overarching fear, which is pervasive, consistent, decoupled from the ecology of school crime, and largely stems from the mass media.

**H2: Institutional Theory** – the gap stems from institutional processes whereby schools seek legitimacy and therefore reflect how centralized hierarchies respond to their institutional environment.

**H3: Confirmatory Bias** – scattered and sporadic events of school violence receive large-scale exposure, often through the media, through confirmatory bias processes. These mechanisms are able to not only generate and perpetuate a culture of fear, but can also serve to legitimate school policies, as it is easier to confirm perceptions of risk than to disconfirm them.

The first hypothesis is cultural, the second is institutional, and the third is cognitive. Since schools do not exist in a vacuum but are an integrated part of society, they are influenced by their institutional environment, and must respond to these pressures. Therefore, both cultural and institutional processes may account for this gap. In this model the school exists as the epicentre, influenced by administrators, the media, and the public (see Figure 3.1, below). As each of these bodies influence one another about issues pertaining to schools, changes to policies and procedures are thrust upon the school. Thus, an important aspect of this research is to examine each piece of the epicentre model – the school itself, the administrators, the media, and the public – in order to understand how the culture of fear has influenced, and is influenced by, each of these organizational bodies.

**Figure 3.1 Epicentre Model**



## **METHODOLOGICAL OVERVIEW**

Certain research questions and hypotheses are best addressed through the use of particular methodological approaches; thus, this project utilizes a mix of qualitative analyses (i.e., semi-structured personal interviews), quantitative analyses (i.e., descriptive statistics of national and international statistics of school crime and violence; descriptive reviews of local surveys regarding students' perceptions of school crime and violence), and content analyses (i.e., newspaper reports on school crime and violence). 'Mixed-methods' is a term that is used to describe research that combines multiple data collection and analysis techniques, either in parallel or successive phases, which aims to "provide a sense of "confirmation" of the data through the enhancement of validity and confidence in the findings and a "completeness" of the understanding of the concept(s) under investigation" (Halcomb and Andrew 2005, as cited in Halcomb and Davidson 2006:40).

As such, blending methodologies reduces their individual limitations (such as reliability and validity issues associated with any one particular method), and instead accentuates their strengths. For example, as Milner (2006) points out, “survey research – for all of its virtues – necessarily misses the flow of social interaction over time and the unanticipated events” that can be noted by interviews and observation (p. 221).

Importantly, as this project utilizes three different but interconnected theoretical approaches, it is imperative that the methodological approaches are suited to answering the research questions and hypotheses that have been generated by each of these theories. Thus, this project takes a uniquely holistic approach: several different research questions are asked to explore issues pertaining to each of the interconnected theoretical approaches, and different levels of analysis (from the individual to the school to the community) are assessed which all require different methodological approaches. It is to an explanation of these methodological approaches that I will now turn.

## **EXAMINING THE PROBLEM**

### ***How Much School Crime And Violence Exists?***

In order to assess the prevalence of school crime and violence, I have taken a quantitative approach. Specifically, I have examined national crime statistics, and other studies that have assessed school crime and violence. Statistics Canada has published numerous documents addressing youth crime and violence in Canada (for example, see: Dauvergne 2008; Taylor-Butts and Bressan 2008). These documents address the rates and prevalence of youth crime, as well as changes over time. They also document the types of reported crimes that youth are committing (for example, property crimes versus violent

crimes), as well as the frequency at which these reported crimes are being committed. Importantly, they document crimes that have occurred on school property. The use of descriptive statistics (as opposed to any kind of multivariate analyses) allows me to determine trends about the prevalence of the problem, which is a necessary step in determining whether a culture of fear exists; in order to determine if the media and public have exaggerated the problem, and if there are disproportionate school-based responses as a result, the extent of the problem itself must be determined.

### ***How Are Schools Responding to Crime and Violence?***

In order to determine if cultural and structural response to school violence are disproportionate to actual prevalence (indicating that a culture of fear does exist), it is pertinent to examine not only how much school crime and violence actually occurs in schools, but also what schools are doing to address the purported social problem. Thus, I have examined school policy documents as well as national and international crime statistics. School policy documents, such as the *Ontario Schools' Code of Conduct* (2000), the *Provincial Model for a Local Police/School Board Protocol* (2011), and the *Education Act* (1990), all of which are discussed in Chapter 1, outline the responses that schools are required to take to prevent or respond to instances of crime and violence. Comparing these policy documents to the national crime statistics has allowed me to assess whether the responses schools are taking are appropriate for the real risk of school crime and violence, or if they seem disproportionate, making the gap between perception and prevalence even greater.

The Ontario Ministry of Education provides information to the public about the policies and programs that schools are mandated to implement, as well as those that schools have chosen to implement. These policy documents are all publicly available, many of them found directly on the Ontario Ministry of Education’s home page (at <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/>). Further, reports about the status of school crime and violence (such as Falconer, Edwards, and MacKinnon’s (2008) report called “The Road to Health: A Final Report on School Safety”) provide recommendations of policies and programs that schools should adopt. Taken together, these two types of documents provide a holistic overview of the cultural and structural responses that schools are utilizing to address the problem of school violence and crime. Thus, I can determine whether schools implement policies and practices based on randomness and perceived prevalence—indicators of a culture of fear—or as a response to direct experiences with crime and violence.

The policy documents explicate what policies and programs schools are *supposed* to be implementing, while interviews and observations allow me to determine how uniformly these policies and programs are *actually* being implemented. In essence, speaking with key players within the schools—including administrators, teachers, parents, and students—provides a strong basis for determining how the Ministry of Education’s policies and procedures are borne out on a daily basis within Ontario schools.

## **THE INTERVIEWS**

Educational systems have numerous hierarchical levels to their organization. Students are grouped into classes; classes are grouped into schools; schools are grouped

into school boards; school boards are grouped into ministries of education, and so on. Perceptions of school safety can be impacted by factors at each of these levels, as individuals bring their own beliefs, attitudes and viewpoints. These characteristics are often shared at any given level, and can influence the characteristics of those groups below them on the hierarchy in which they are grouped.

To study only one level provides an incomplete picture (Goldstein 1984:71-72). As discussed previously, a culture of fear exists when there is little variation in the perception of risk, and when that risk is perceived by all individuals to be pervasive and random. That is, the fear is decoupled from the ecology of school crime and violence. It is therefore necessary to interview members of each hierarchical level to determine if variations exist within or among key players of the school system, or if key players within the school system have similar perceptions and fears of school crime and violence. In order to accurately study individual's own perceptions and interpretations of their personal experiences, it is best to use personal interviews, as people are able to elaborate and clarify meanings as they experience them (Kvale 1996:105). Thus, the use of interviews allows me to explore whether there is a general, pervasive and overarching fear of school violence, or if fear is relegated only to certain members or groups (e.g., only students; only teachers; etc.). It also allows me to explore how the mechanisms of confirmatory bias are at play—if at all—among key players within the school system, and to explore how these individuals navigate their institutional environments.

Although it is important to assess whether variation exists among hierarchical levels, it is also important to assess whether variation exists between schools (ecological

variation). If fear is elevated in schools with a high risk<sup>7</sup> of crime and violence, then the fear is justified as it is based on concrete experience. Fear that is concrete and based on personal experience is not part of the more general culture of fear. But, if the fear is consistent between high-risk schools and low-risk schools, then it is apparent that fear of school crime and violence is pervasive and based on randomness and unpredictability, which would indicate that a culture of fear does, in fact, exist. Thus, I can determine whether fears of school crime and violence are related to personal experience, or related to randomness and pervasiveness (i.e., I can determine whether fear stems from experience or perception). Thus, it is especially important to examine multiple schools, at different risk levels, in order to assess the impact of ecological variation and determine if fear or perception of school crime and violence differ depending on an individual's surroundings. Examining multiple schools with varied risk levels allows for the determination of whether individuals associated with high risk schools in high crime neighbourhoods are more or less fearful than individuals associated with low risk schools and low crime neighbourhoods.

Interviews with school personnel provides the basis for understanding exactly what structural and cultural responses schools are implementing, such as security cameras (a structural response), or practices such as Restorative Justice (a cultural response).

However, as the school personnel are able to provide insight into their own school's

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<sup>7</sup> "High risk" is a phrase often utilized to describe adolescents and schools that face disadvantage, whether through poverty, high rates of unemployment, or neighbourhoods characterized by high levels of crime and violence (Swahn and Bossarte 2009). Within this project, schools located in/near the downtown core of the city, which are surrounded by urban neighbourhoods with higher levels of poverty, unemployment, and disorder would be considered "high risk", and those located in/near residential and suburban neighbourhoods with lower levels of poverty, unemployment, and disorder would be considered "low risk".

responses, the interview data are supplemented with school policy documents, in order to determine if responses to school crime and violence are implemented at all schools, regardless of their actual risk of crime and violence, and whether the school's responses stem from perception of fear and randomness, or from actual experience with crime and violence.

For this project, a total of 66 semi-structured<sup>8</sup> personal interviews were conducted with various members of many schools in a school board within southern Ontario. The respondents included: school principals (4); teachers (10); parents (9); students (42); and a police officer (1). The school board under examination has 25 high schools under its purview: 18 public and seven Catholic; 13 of these 25 schools (52%) are represented by the interview respondents. See table 3.1 (below) for a breakdown of the interview respondents by position and school<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> Semi-structured interviews allow the researcher to guide the interview, allowing for both structure and flexibility. In essence, semi-structured interviews follow a set of pre-established questions, but simultaneously allow room to ask additional questions, probe for clarification, or elaborate and pursue other lines of inquiry (Kvale 1996). Thus, the researcher is able to ensure that the respondents are all asked a similar set of questions in the interests of methodological rigour and conceptual continuity, but at the same time allows room for elaboration on key concepts, to tease out the nuanced details and perceptions of each individual's personal experiences.

<sup>9</sup> Only 65 of the 66 interviews appear in this table, as the police officer was not affiliated with any one particular school.



**Table 3.1 Breakdown of Interview Respondents by Position and School**

School (Pseudonym <sup>10</sup> )	NUMBER OF INTERVIEW RESPONDENTS				
	Principal	Teachers	Parents	Students	Total
Agrestic High School	1	1	2	1	5
Bayside High School	1	2	1	21	25
Bellaire Academy	1	1	0	1	3
Breaker High School	0	0	1	1	2
Capeside High School	0	0	2	4	6
Degrassi High School	0	0	0	12	12
Eastland High School	0	0	1	0	1
Liberty High School	0	1	0	1	2
Oakbridge High School	1	0	0	0	1
Shermer High School	0	2	0	0	2
Sunnydale High School	0	1	0	0	1
Sweet Valley High School	0	2	0	0	2
West Beverly High School	0	0	2	1	3
<b>Total</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>65</b>

The interviews varied in length, ranging from just over 10 minutes, to almost an hour and a half. The average length of the interviews was 33 minutes. Of the 66 interviews, only three individuals did not consent to have the interview tape-recorded. In these instances, I took rigorous notes during and immediately following the interview. Interviews that were tape-recorded were transcribed verbatim<sup>11</sup>. Of the 66 interviews, 25 (38%) were with male respondents and 41 (62%) were with female respondents. See Table 3.2 for a breakdown of interview respondents by position and sex.

<sup>10</sup> All schools and all respondents were assigned a pseudonym in the interests of protecting confidentiality.

<sup>11</sup> Halcomb and Davidson (2006) note that “a combination of verbatim transcription and researcher notation of participants’ nonverbal behavior has been cited as being central to the reliability, validity, and veracity of qualitative data collection” (p. 40). Thus, the interviews that were tape-recorded were transcribed verbatim, and field notes were taken to supplement the interview data.

**Table 3.2 Breakdown of Interview Respondents by Position and Sex**

<b>Position</b>	<b>Sex</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Parent</b>	Male	3	9
	Female	6	
<b>Principal</b>	Male	3	4
	Female	1	
<b>Student</b>	Male	15	42
	Female	27	
<b>Teacher</b>	Male	3	10
	Female	7	
<b>Police</b>	Male	1	1
	Female	0	

***Sampling***

After receiving ethics clearance from McMaster’s Research Ethics Board (see Appendix A for a copy of McMaster University’s Research Ethics Board clearance certificate), I began recruiting participants through convenience sampling. A letter of information outlining the project was provided (either via email or in person; see Appendix B for a copy of the Letter of Information) to contacts from my immediate social network, including friends and extended-family members, where no existing personal or intimate relationships that involved any dimension of power or supervision existed. Those interested in participating contacted me (either via email or the telephone), and a meeting time and location was established. Individuals were provided with a consent form (which can be found in Appendix C), and prior to their participation were required to give active consent to be interviewed and to have their interview tape-recorded. Interview locations varied widely, and included the telephone, the respondent’s home, local coffee shops, a local park, the researcher’s office, and a police station.

At each interview with respondents located through convenience sampling, I provided additional letters of information for them to share with friends or co-workers that they believed might be interested in speaking to me about this project. Thus, the convenience sample turned into a ‘snowball sample’. Snowball sampling occurs when the respondent is asked to identify suitable contacts that they believe will be interested in participating in the research, and it is a particularly effective technique when the members of a population are difficult to access (Babbie 2007). In total, 33 of the 66 interviews (50%) were acquired through this combination of convenience and snowball sampling.

The remaining 33 interview respondents (50%) were located through stratified sampling at two high schools—one public and one Catholic—within the same school board in southern Ontario. After receiving ethics clearance from the school board’s Research Ethics Board (REB), one vice-principal from each school was contacted about the project, and the vice-principal served as the primary point of contact, and the means of gaining entry into the school setting. At each school, letters of information and parental consent forms were disseminated to each student from two classrooms within each grade (9, 10, 11 and 12); in total, 240 information packages were disseminated at each school. Parental consent forms were deemed necessary by the REB, as the student respondents were primarily under the age of 18. The letter of information that was sent home to parents described the nature of the study; the consent form asked for parental permission for their child to participate in the study, and whether or not the parent would allow the child’s interview to be tape-recorded. Student participants were randomly selected from the returned forms where parental consent had been granted. Even though the students

selected for interviews had received permission from their parents, student consent was sought to ensure that the students themselves were informed about the project and felt comfortable participating. Therefore, prior to commencing the interview, students were read an oral consent form and asked if they would like to be interviewed and whether they would consent to having the interview tape-recorded (see Appendix D for a copy of the Oral Consent Form). These interviews occurred on the school premises, in vacant classrooms and conference rooms.

### ***Sampling Limitations***

Every sampling methodology has its limitations. Convenience sampling is limited to the existing social networks of the researcher, and as such the respondents may have similar interests, values and opinions to that of the researcher. Similarly, in order for snowball sampling to be effective, the sample respondents must be involved in some kind of network with one another, and as a result they likely share similar characteristics. As Arber (1993) points out, “This is both a strength and a potential weakness of the method. An advantage of snowball sampling is that it reveals a network of contracts which can itself be studied. A potential problem is that it only includes those within a connected network of individuals” (p. 74). Thus, the first 33 respondents—those garnered through convenience and snowball sampling—may share similar characteristics and connections that, as a result, could lead to bias within the data.

In order to overcome these limitations, the remainder of the project was designed so that the random sample from the returned parental consent forms would yield a representative sample of student respondents. However, this was not the case. At the

public school, the vice-principal was provided with electronic copies of the letter of information and parental consent form, with the understanding that the school would disseminate the information packages and collect the returned parental consent forms, which I would open and use to undertake random sampling. However, the vice-principal went further than anticipated and instead provided me with a list of 21 students that had permission to be interviewed. Thus, it is unclear whether the principal actually randomly sampled students, or selected only those who had been granted permission.

Learning from this, the Catholic school's vice-principal was provided with 240 information packages: hard copies of the letter of information and parental consent form, in the envelopes that the students were to return the forms in, ready to easily disseminate to the students. Additionally, the vice-principal was instructed that when the envelopes were returned, they should be left in a box in the main office, and I would return in one week to collect them and would provide him with a list of the students that were to be interviewed. This ensured that I would be able to randomly sample from the students who received permission to be interviewed. Unfortunately, there was a very low response rate. Of the 240 information packages that were disseminated, only 43 of the consent forms were returned (18%), even though the students were instructed to return the forms *whether or not* their parents provided permission<sup>12</sup>. Additionally, 23 of the returned forms did not give permission, seven of the returned forms were blank, and only 13 of the returned forms gave permission for their child to be interviewed. Thus, random sampling could not occur; instead, interviews were scheduled with all students who had received

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<sup>12</sup> Other studies have had similar issues when active consent is required. For example, Milner (2006) had difficulty getting parents to return consent forms, even though the forms were mailed to the students' homes, and the researchers made follow-up phone calls to encourage parents to return the forms.

permission. One student was not interviewed, as that student was absent on the two days that the interviews occurred. Nevertheless, the students interviewed at both of these schools varied in grade/age, and represented various social and cultural groups. For a breakdown of the students' demographic characteristics by school, see Table 3.3 (below).

**Table 3.3 Demographic Characteristics of Students at Bayside and Degrassi High Schools**

Characteristics		Number of Students	
		Degrassi High School	Bayside High School
Sex	Female	9	12
	Male	3	9
Grade	9	2	5
	10	5	2
	11	2	2
	12	3	9
	12+	0	3
Race/Ethnicity	Caucasian	8	18
	African-Canadian	2	3
	Other	2	0

Despite these challenges, and given the nature of the research questions asked in this project, it is not likely that random or stratified sampling was necessary. Although qualitative researchers pursue representative samples of the groups they wish to study, there are often insufficient resources available (such as a sampling frame of the entire population) to study a large group; however, much important sociological work has been completed based on non-probability samples (Arber 1993:72-73). Similarly, the use of the Safe Schools Survey offers a corrective to any undue sampling bias that may have occurred while garnering interview respondents.

## **THE SAFE SCHOOLS SURVEY**

Survey data were analyzed to examine more general trends of school crime and violence—and fear of school crime and violence—within the greater student population. Namely, the Safe Schools Survey (which is an online survey given years to all students at all schools from grades 4 through 12 within the school board under study; see Vaillancourt et al. 2010) examines how often students claim they are bullied, if there are areas within or around the school that students feel are dangerous, and the frequency of bullying and other acts of school violence and crime that students are experiencing while at school. The survey includes questions that explore if and when students have felt unsafe at school, specific areas of the school that they do not feel safe (e.g., hallways, bathrooms), and if students are aware of gang activity or the presence, or use, of weapons at school. The results of the Safe Schools Survey, which were obtained from other researchers, is complemented by the qualitative data gathered through individual interviews, and allows for a direct exploration of variations between the perception and prevalence of school crime and violence. Further, the results of this survey provide context for the interview data; findings from the qualitative interviews are grounded within the general perspectives of students from all schools within the same school board.

## **PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS**

In order to determine if schools' responses to school crime and violence—through policy and program implementation—stem from public pressures, it is imperative to examine the public's perceptions of school crime and violence. This was accomplished in

two ways: 1) through the examination of public opinion polls; and 2) through a media content analysis of news reports from two Canadian newspapers.

### ***Public Opinion Polls***

In order to understand whether the public's perceptions of school crime and violence are congruent with the perceptions of key players directly associated with schools, public opinion polls were examined. Discussions of crime and violence often center on public opinion. Further, if a culture of fear does exist, it stems from the public's perceptions, and is not concentrated exclusively within the school. Thus, determining the public's views about school and youth crime and violence is an important aspect in determining whether a culture of fear exists. In order to determine how the public perceives school crime and violence, and whether public perception of school crime and violence has changed over time, over 30 Gallup Polls dealing with school and youth crime and violence were examined. See table 3.4 for a list of Gallup Polls<sup>13</sup> related to school crime and violence.

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<sup>13</sup> All Gallup Polls can be found at <http://www.gallup.com/home.aspx>. Detailed citations for the Gallup Polls that have been cited in this dissertation can be found in the References.



**Table 3.4 Gallup Polls**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Gallup Poll</b>
1999	Many Teens Report Copycat-Related Problems at School in Wake of Littleton Shooting Media Portrayals of Violence Seen by Many as Causes of Real-Life Violence One-Third of Teenagers Feel Unsafe at School; One in Six Says That Weapons Are a Big Problem in Their School Public Continues to Believe a Variety of Factors Caused Littleton Public Views Littleton Tragedy As Sign of Deeper Problems In Country School Violence Still a Worry for American Parents Teenagers and Adults Differ on Causes, Cures for Columbine-Type Situations Teens Often Live in a Climate of Fear, Uncertainty and Danger
2000	One in Three Say It Is Very Likely That Columbine-Type Shootings Could Happen in Their Community
2001	Americans Look to Parents to Stop School Shootings Americans Say the Family is the Starting Point for Preventing Another Columbine Majority of Parents Think a School Shooting Could Occur in Their Community
2002	Americans List Biggest challenges of U.S. Schools Changing the Fate of Young Criminals Parents Concerned About School Safety School Violence Knows No Borders Teens Sound Off on School Safety The Blame Game: Youth and Media Violence “These young people today...”
2003	How Secure Are Teens with School Safety? Parents More Confident About Child Safety at School
2004	Most Parents Start School Year Without Fear
2005	Funding Tops Public’s List of School Woes Public: Society Powerless to Stop School Shootings Teens Say Safety Issues Top Problem at School
2006	Americans Not Convinced that Local Schools Are in Crisis Before Recent Shootings, Most Parents Not Worried About School Safety One in Four Parents Concerned About Child’s Safety at School Parent Concern About Children’s Safety at School on the Rise
2007	The Divide Between Public School Parents and Private School Parents
2009	Children and Violence

The use of public opinion polls has both disadvantages and advantages. On the topic of school crime and violence, few Canadian public opinion polls have been conducted. In fact, of the aforementioned Gallup Polls, only two of these polls involved

Canadians: *Changing the Fate of Young Criminals* (2002) and *School Violence Knows No Borders* (2002). Thus, the public opinion being discussed is primarily American.

However, both American and Canadian news media (including television, internet and newspaper) frequently report on these public opinion polls in their news stories; thus, Canadians are exposed to the results of these polls. Kim et al. (2011) report that “more people have become consumers of polls ... [following] a poll occasionally or regularly in the media” (p. 183). When the media report the results of these polls, they do not always identify whether the respondents were American or Canadian; thus Canadians may believe that American public opinion poll results are indicative of Canadian public opinion. Similarly, Canadians regularly consume news stemming from the United States – whether watching American television news reports, or consuming Canadian news that reports on American content, such as the rampage school shootings at Columbine High School and Virginia Tech, and this can influence their opinions of the safety and security of Canadian schools.

However, when both Canadians and Americans are polled about school violence and how it can be prevented, it turns out that their opinions about causes and solutions are quite similar. Mazzuca (2002a; 2002b) reports that both Canadian and American adults express similar points of view with regard to school discipline and gun control; adults in both nations tend to express support for stricter treatment of young offenders and believe that the causes and prevention of school shootings are related to issues of gun control. Therefore, as a benchmark, public opinion polls are useful to gauge the Canadian public’s perceptions of school crime and violence.

Although public opinion polls attempt to be rigorous in their sampling, data collection, and interpretation<sup>14</sup>, they should be interpreted with caution. For this project, the results of the public opinion polls serve as only one indicator of how the general public may perceive school crime and violence. They are used as a benchmark and triangulated with other forms of data, including: national and international descriptive statistics about school crime and violence; qualitative interviews with key players of the school system; and media reports from national and local newspaper reports of school crime and violence.

### ***Media Analysis***

According to the culture of fear hypothesis, media reports of school crime and violence are highly prevalent and quite sensationalist. Therefore, comparing an analysis of news media reports to rates of school crime and violence (acquired through national statistical data) will determine if the media are reporting exaggerated or inflated accounts of school violence and crime, which would perpetuate a culture of fear. Additionally, the comparison allows me to determine if the media disproportionately report more heinous events of school violence and crime (such as school shootings, which account for an extremely small portion of all acts of school crime and violence), which would further exacerbate a culture of fear. Comparing news media reports of school crime and violence to national crime statistics allows me to examine how accurately media reports reflect the amount of school and youth crime and violence that is occurring. Therefore, I can determine whether trends in media reporting are similar to national statistical data on

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<sup>14</sup> For a discussion of Gallup's sampling methodology and data collection and interpretation techniques, see "How are polls conducted?" from *Where America Stands*, by Newport, Saad and Moore at <http://media.gallup.com/PDF/FAQ/HowArePolls.pdf>

crime and violence over time, or if the media reports are disproportionate to the amount of crime and violence that is actually occurring.

Although the media do not create social problems, per se, they have the ability to focus and exacerbate problems. Thus, their framing of articles about school crime and violence could influence how school crime and violence is perceived. For example, articles that sensationalize or exaggerate school crime and violence, or use terminology such as “epidemic,” “massacre,” and “rampage”, could influence the public’s perception and their levels of fear. Thus, a content analysis of newspaper articles about school crime and violence examines how the media represents issues of school crime and violence, and whether reporting on the issue has changed over time to become more prevalent now than in the past.

The public receives much of their information about school crime and violence from the media. Zimring and Hawkins (1997) postulate that the amount of media attention toward violent crimes and serious instances of violence will increase the public’s level of fear, which makes it pertinent to explore how crime and violence are constructed in the news media. It is important to undertake a content analysis, and not solely examine reporting trends over time, to determine the media’s role in perpetuating the culture of fear. For example, Gardner (2008) claims that “violence that isn’t as dramatic as murder gets less attention. Still less is given to property crime. The result is a very clear pattern in reporting. The more heinous the crime, the more attention the media give it” (p. 191). Similarly, when the media report on one particular incident, they often refer to previous, high profile and extremely violent events. Anchoring these events can

lead to claims about such things as school violence “epidemics” as the anchoring device serves to provide confirmation of the perception that violence is increasing. These aspects of media reporting can perpetuate—and even create—a culture of fear, and thus must be explored via a thorough content analysis of newspaper reports.

Therefore, I conducted a content analysis of two newspapers’ coverage of stories relating to youth and school crime and violence. This allows for a systematic and objective description of the informational context in which readers attain their information of public issues. *The Globe and Mail* is a daily, national newspaper, and as such it covers both national and international stories. Similarly, a daily, local Canadian newspaper from the same area in which the schools under study are located, covers more local stories<sup>15</sup>. The use of both a local and a national newspaper accounts for Liska and Baccaglini’s (1990) findings, that fear of crime is heightened when newspapers cover stories on local crime, but fear of crime is reduced when newspapers cover national or international (nonlocal) crime. Additionally, these two newspapers have a large readership, and provide good representation of the news media outlets where many of the parents, teachers, administrators, and other key players in the schools under study would gather their news.

Two news databases were used to generate a list of reports for analysis:

*LexisNexis*, and *Factiva*. Using the search “school crime OR school violence” (within *LexisNexis*), and the search string “school (crime or violence)” (within *Factiva*), the search initially yielded a return of 3118 news items. This population was examined

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<sup>15</sup> In the interests of confidentiality, I do not want to disclose the school board from where my interview respondents are affiliated. Thus, I have chosen to not release the newspaper’s name, and instead indicate that it is from within the same area as the schools under study, and is from a city in southern Ontario.

manually and rationalized to a sample of 2497 discrete news items by eliminating duplicates, and removing stories that did not pertain to school crime or violence. For example, one resulting article was actually about a television series, and was reported in the search results because it purportedly: “merged elements of old-school crime drama with Buffy the Vampire Slayer” (Ryan 2009: R30). This is but one example of many resulting articles that actually had nothing to do with school crime or school violence, and were thus discounted.

These searches covered all dates between January 1, 1990<sup>16</sup>, and December 31, 2010, allowing more than enough information to determine trends over time. Following framing analysis (Goffman 1974; Gamson 1992; Entman 1993; Benford and Snow 2000; and Tankard 2001), themes were identified first by a cursory reading of the material, in order to identify the major themes present in each story, allowing for the development of coding categories. The location of each article was recorded, as it is assumed that the most important, or prominent, stories will appear near the front of the paper. The total number of articles for each incident of school violence or crime was counted, to see if certain topics or events are reported more frequently than others. This was followed by a thorough analysis and tabulation of themes present in each story, ensuring that the themes and codes were grounded in the articles themselves. See Chapter 4 for the analysis of media reports, and a more thorough discussion of framing analysis.

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<sup>16</sup> This was the earliest searchable date for both newspapers.

## CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

As noted previously, the culture of fear may not be the only explanation that accounts for the gap between the perception and the prevalence of school crime and violence. Schools may be responding to pressures from their institutional environment, and implementing responses as a means of retaining their legitimacy, and appeasing their constituents through a façade of competence. Thus, it is important to explore *why* and *how* schools implement responses to school crime and violence. This is achieved through the use of the aforementioned qualitative methodology, specifically through semi-structured interviews with administrators, and other school personnel, and the examination of school policy documents. This combination of methods allows me to address why schools implement responses, for example as a reactionary response to the ecology of school violence, or as a result of institutional pressures based on more generalized fears. Additionally, it allows me to address how schools are implementing responses, for example, whether programs are being addressed to the extent that they are intended, or if the loosely coupled approach of schools impacts the effectiveness of the implementation.

Relying solely on any one of these methodological approaches would not accurately determine whether or not a culture of fear exists. The combination of methods, however, provides for a uniquely holistic approach. Each of the methodological components has its strengths and weaknesses. For example, interviews and observation can provide data for excellent description, observation of interactions that would not be seen through statistics or reports, and has the ability to address the “how” as well as the

“why”. Additionally, the analysis of existing statistics and survey data can provide information from much larger samples, identifying what is happening nationally, not just locally. Even though media and other reports are not necessarily trustworthy sources, they do provide an excellent overview of what is occurring within society, as they reflect the general attitudes and behaviours of society. Combining these methods allows me to take advantage of these strengths, and overcome these weaknesses. Triangulating both the methodology and the data sources, as encouraged by Ragin (1987; 1999), reveals the substantively and theoretically meaningful details that would be lacking otherwise. Ragin (1994) claimed that the use of triangulation for this type of research ensures that “there is a reciprocal clarification of the underlying character of the phenomena under investigation and the theoretical concepts that they are believed to exemplify” (p. 103).



#### **CHAPTER 4: THE NEWS MEDIA’S PORTRAYAL OF SCHOOL CRIME AND VIOLENCE**

As demonstrated in Chapter 1, school violence and crime is a rare phenomenon, and the statistical trends demonstrate that actual instances of school violence and crime are on the decline. Since most individuals do not bear witness to school crime and violence, they often learn about it through media reports. As predicted in the culture of fear hypothesis, media reports of school crime and violence are highly prevalent and quite sensationalist. In this chapter, I examine the quantity of news articles as they are presented over time, which demonstrates that media representation of school crime and violence varies over time, and is not what we would expect if it were representative of rates of school crime and violence. In fact, it appears that media representation of school crime and violence does not follow a linear trend; instead, the focus is on extreme acts of school violence, specifically school shootings, which account for an extremely small portion of all acts of school crime and violence. This episodic focus on the most extreme forms of school violence (i.e. those deemed to be the most ‘newsworthy’) may have the ability to create fear within the public. Additionally, I compare the frequency of news media reports of school crime and violence to actual data on the rates of school crime and violence, which demonstrates that the media exaggerate the perception of school crime and violence through their disproportionate reporting on the most extreme instances of school violence. The content of the news articles is also explored, which demonstrates that episodic framing (Iyengar 1994) is primarily used, helping to perpetuate the idea that school violence and crime is inescapable. The language that is used within the articles also may exacerbate fear and create perceptions of extreme danger and random

victimization. Finally, news article frequency is compared to parental fear (as reported in public opinion polls), which demonstrates that fear of school crime and violence is more closely related to media representation than to actual crime rates. Parental fear seems to parallel media reporting, indicating that parents—and possibly the public, in general—are not necessarily more fearful of school crime and violence, but instead respond according to the media’s concentration on the topic.

## **METHODOLOGY**

Undertaking a content analysis is a demonstrated method of providing a comprehensive map of the media’s terrain (for example, see Greenberg and Hier 2009). However, in order to delineate media trends and understand discursive patterns, data collection and analyses must include large collections of text in order to deal with the—as it is often referred to in the critical media literature—‘massness’ of the mass media (Deacon et al. 1999). As Winston (1990) argues, large collections of text are necessary “for establishing maps ... Without the ‘map’, no case can be sustained as to any kind of cultural skewedness except on the basis of one-off examples” (p. 62). In order to accommodate for the sheer volume of the mass media, this project utilizes a large-scale media analysis of news reports relating to youth and school crime and violence as reported in two newspapers: *The Globe and Mail*, a Canadian national newspaper, and a newspaper from within the same area as the schools under study. Using *LexisNexis* and *Factiva*, and the search terms “school crime OR school violence” (within *LexisNexis*) and “school (crime or violence)” (within *Factiva*), the search initially yielded a return of 3118 news items spanning from January 1, 1990 through December 31, 2010. After removal of

duplicates and irrelevant articles this was reduced to a sample of 2497 discrete news items. The systematic data collection techniques and the analysis presented in this chapter are more thorough than the majority of empirical research undertaken within most media analyses. As a result, the findings presented in this project are more valid and reliable than most critical media analyses that utilize media representations of social problems.

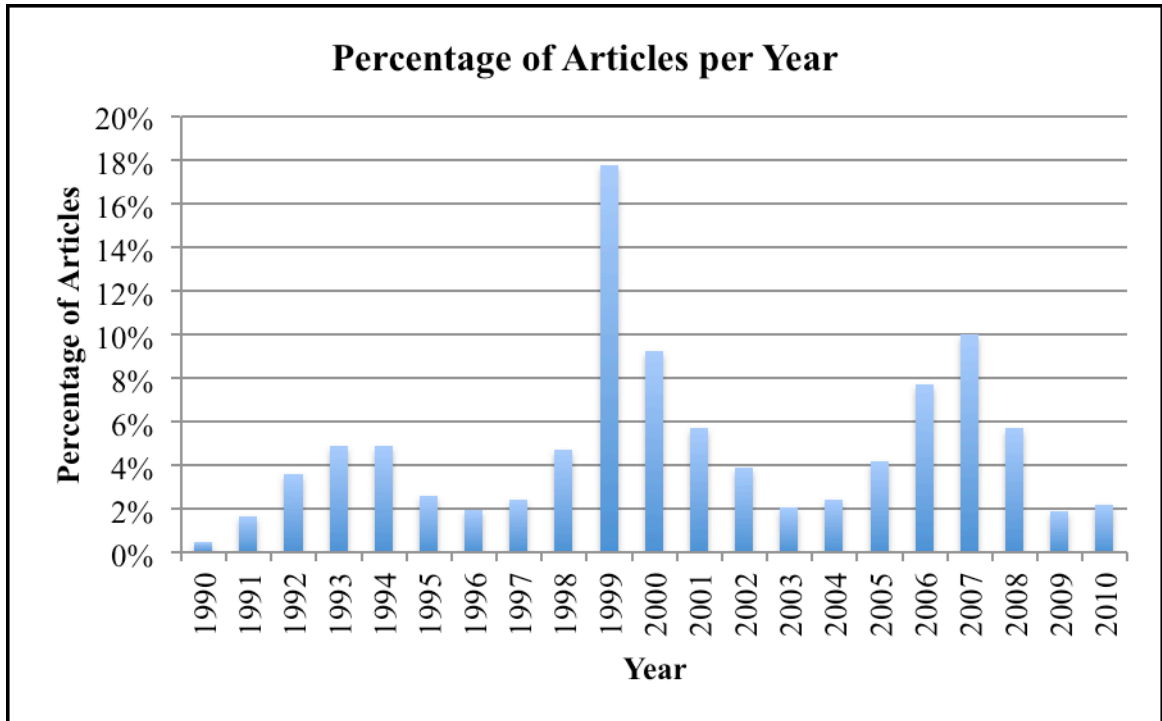
Following framing analysis (Goffman 1974; Gamson 1992; Entman 1993; Benford and Snow 2000; and Tankard 2001), themes were identified first by a cursory reading of the news articles, in order to identify the major themes present in each story, allowing for the development of coding categories. For example, information about the article, such as the publication date and number of words, was recorded. Whether the article was national (Canadian) or international, and whether the article was local (in the area of the school board where the qualitative interviews took place) or non-local was also recorded. Themes, including whether the article focused on a particular incident or general trends, whether the article focused on an incident occurring within or outside of the school, and whether the topic of the article was a school shooting, or if the article only made reference to a school shooting, was recorded. Additionally, the focus of the article was also coded, including if the article was about a particular school incident, an anti-violence or crime policy, an anti-violence or crime program, charges, a trial, etc. This was followed by a thorough analysis and tabulation of themes present in each story, ensuring that the themes and codes were grounded in the articles themselves. See Chapter 3 for a more thorough description of the methodology utilized for this media content analysis. In

the following sections I outline how the media frame and present stories regarding school crime and violence.

### **TRENDS OVER TIME**

Twenty year of articles (from January 1, 1990 to December 31, 2010) were gathered and analyzed for this content analysis. The number of articles per year varies widely, ranging from a mere 12 in 1990 to an astounding 443 in 1999. As shown below in Figure 4.1, there is not a linear trend to the reporting of school crime and violence. Instead, the articles appear in waves. There are three distinct waves over the twenty-year period of analysis, with peaks in 1993-1994, 1999, and 2007. In terms of general school crime and violence, this is not what we would expect. As established in Chapter 1, youth crime and violence is on the decline, or remaining stable at relatively low levels. As a result, if media reporting is representative, we should expect the amount of reporting on the topic of school crime and violence to be declining. However, these distinct waves and three key peaks are indicative of the media's differential focus on rare events such as overarching anti-violence policies (such as the "Safe Schools Act" and resultant increase in the number of suspensions and expulsions that accounts for the peak in articles during 1993-1994), and school shootings (which account for the largest peaks in 1999 and 2007, as a result of the Columbine and Virginia Tech massacres, respectively). The lack of a linear trend indicates that the media are not constructing schools as increasingly unsafe places to be; instead, they are responding to newsworthy incidents in an episodic fashion, which result in the creation of news waves.

**Figure 4.1 Article Frequencies**



It appears that the media has constructed ‘crime waves’ (Sacco 1995), or ‘news waves’, differentially highlighting school crime and violence at various points in time. Thus, these news waves are episodic in nature, following events of extreme school violence, and then tapering off. Many studies have demonstrated the media’s role in the creation of ‘crime waves,’ even when there is not an increase in statistical measures of the crime under examination (Doyle 2006). A crime wave is an increased social awareness about a particular type of crime that is often perpetuated by the media through amplified attention to and coverage of a particular crime incident or event (Fishman 1978). Vasterman (2005) demonstrates that the media create crime waves when “An (unusual) event triggers increased media attention; the media set their focus on this specific topic or event; they enlarge it, and by so doing evoke all kinds of social responses, which will in

turn become news as well, further stimulating the news wave” (p. 511). Although media attention toward a particular topic will eventually decrease, it can be expected that it will rise up again since the public has a heightened awareness and sensitivity to it (Vasterman 2005). Figure 4.1, above, demonstrates this, as we can see ebbs and flows in the wave-like reporting trends. Media focus on school crime and violence declines around 1996, but increases again after the 1999 Columbine school shooting. Again, in 2003, we see a decline in media focus, but the focus increases once again with the third wave that peaks in 2007 with the Virginia Tech school shooting. However, since school shootings are clearly newsworthy events, these news waves should come as no surprise.

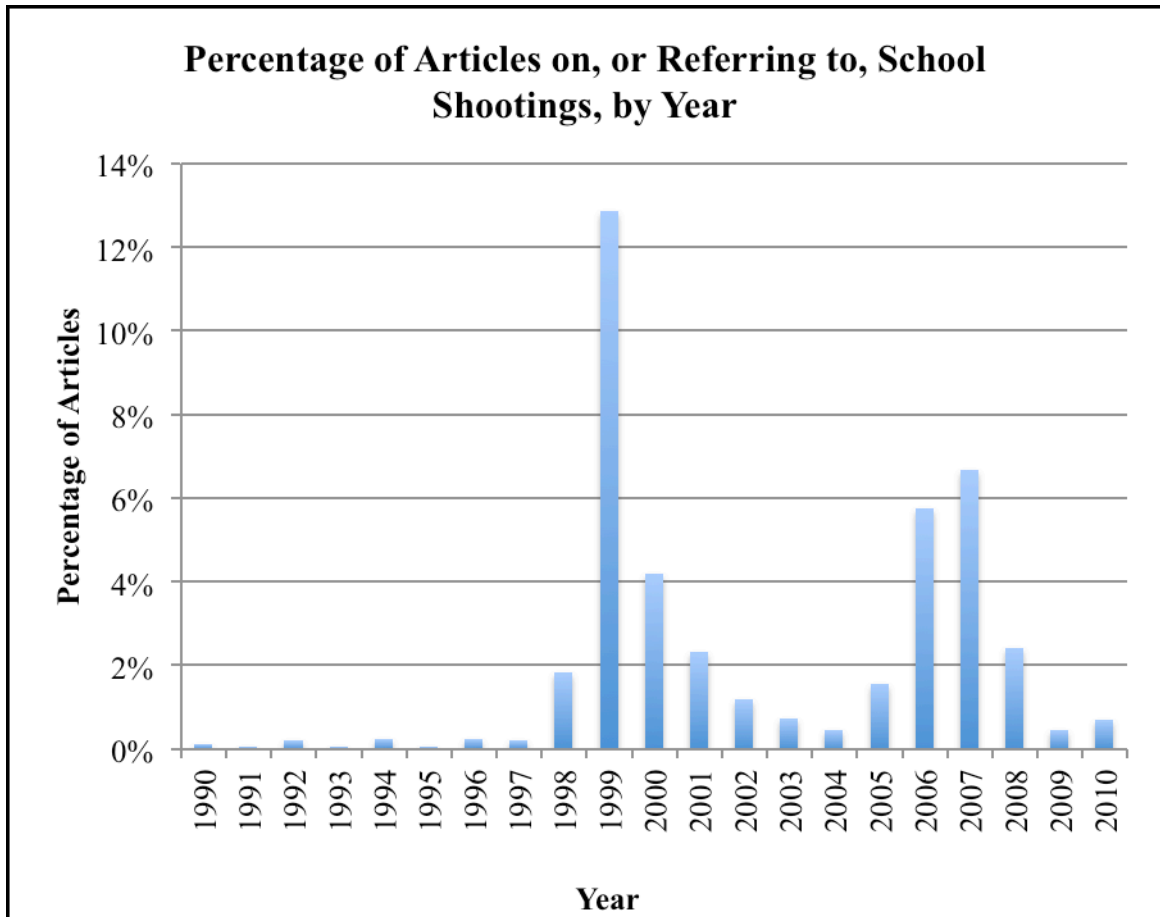
When the media report on a particular incident, in this case school crime or violence, they often refer to previous, high profile and extremely violent events. As Sacco (2005) points out, “... the tendency in contemporary media to find news themes in crime reporting, to generalize from the particular case to a broader problem, is ... one of the defining features of crime wave construction in the media” (p. 20). This is also indicative of the anchoring process within confirmatory bias: when a prominent event is used as a cognitive reference point, it serves as an anchor which may guide the reader’s perceptions and biases. The articles within this media analysis demonstrate this: the media focus on the most extreme cases (in this case, school shootings), which is where I will now turn.

### **FOCUS ON SCHOOL SHOOTINGS**

The public receives much of their information about school crime and violence from the media. Zimring and Hawkins (1997) postulate that the amount of media attention toward violent crimes and serious instances of violence will increase the

public's level of fear. For example, Gardner (2008) claims that "violence that isn't as dramatic as murder gets less attention. Still less is given to property crime. The result is a very clear pattern in reporting. The more heinous the crime, the more attention the media give it" (p. 191). This is true of the current media analysis: not only are the reporting peaks due to school shootings, but a substantial number of articles over the twenty year period of analysis are about school shootings (which are, in fact, quite rare phenomena). In fact, 402 articles (16.1%) are news reports about school shootings, including articles on the victims, the perpetrators, the school itself, and the surrounding community. An additional 653 articles (26.2%) refer to school shootings within their report, often linking familiar forms of school violence (e.g., fighting) with a school shooting. In total, 42.3% of the news articles analyzed are about, or refer to, school shootings.

**Figure 4.2** Articles on or Referring to School Shootings

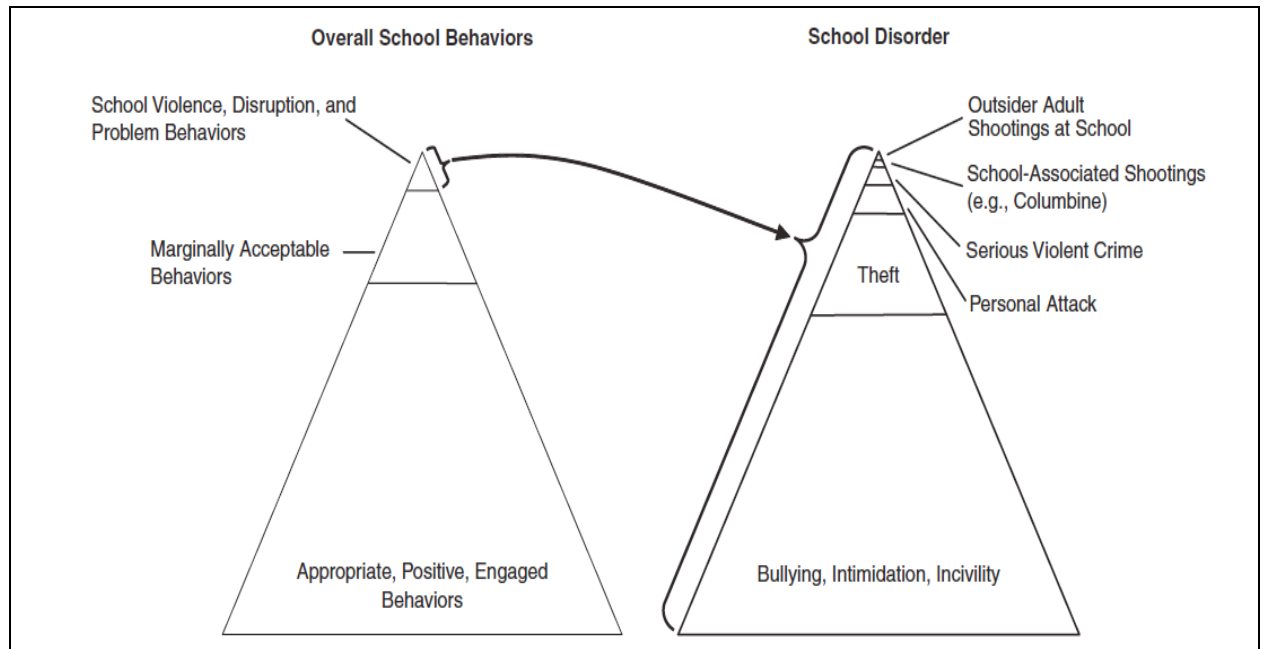


This is not to say that school shootings are not newsworthy events. The disturbing and shocking nature of school shootings, as well as their rarity, make them newsworthy; but, that rarity also means that the media’s focus on school shootings is disproportionate to their actual occurrence. In fact, Surette (1998) notes that since violent crime is so infrequent its newsworthiness is elevated which makes it appear more frequent within the news; as a result, this type of infrequent crime actually becomes perceived as the archetypal image of crime.



Behaviours that are considered to be that of school violence comprise only a small portion of the overall pattern of negative social events that occur at school (Mayer and Furlong 2010). School shootings comprise an even smaller portion of these events. In Figure 4.3, below, the triangle on the left hand side delineates the three major components of general school behaviours, with the largest component being appropriate, positive, engaged behaviours; the next largest component (the base of the triangle) is that of marginally acceptable behaviours, and the tip of the triangle is that of school violence. The triangle on the right hand side of the diagram delineates the behaviours that make up the tip of the triangle on the right hand side. As we can see, the ‘tip of the tip’ are those of school-associated shootings like Columbine and outsider adult shootings at school (Mayer and Furlong 2010). The sheer volume of media reports on very rare events of extreme school violence, such as school shootings, that only are representative of the ‘tip of the tip’ of the triangle serves to “generate an inflated perception of danger” (Cornell, 2006, as cited in Borum et al. 2010).

**Figure 4.3 An Overview of School Behaviours**



Picture Source: Mayer & Furlong 2010:17

The focus on the ‘tip of the tip’ may help generate a heightened perception of risk and fear, as it is a disproportionate representation of the amount and type of school crime and violence that is actually occurring. However, the media’s focus on the ‘tip of the tip’ occurs in an episodic, news cycle fashion (as demonstrated in Figure 4.1); thus, the fear-generating effects may actually be short-lived, since most individuals rarely experience the types of behaviours that comprise the ‘tip of the tip’ of the triangle.

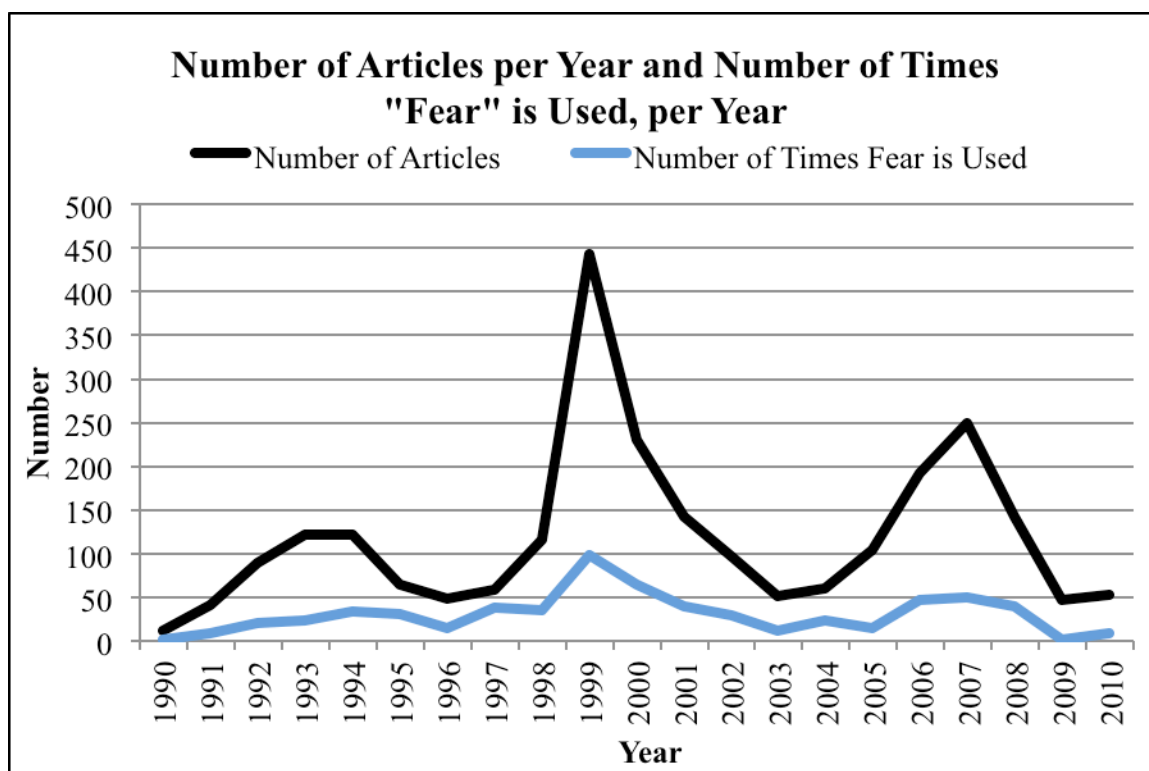
### **THE MEDIA AND FEAR**

Prior research has documented the implications stemming from the news media’s reporting of crime and particular focus on violent crime, including a fearful and poorly informed public (Heath and Gilbert 1996; Best 1999; Kupchik and Bracy 2009).

Although the media focus primarily on school crime and violence events that represent the ‘tip of the tip’ of the triangle (as outlined above), they also frequently utilize the term

“fear”. In the content analysis of articles on school crime and violence, “fear” was used 654 times within the 2497 articles. According to Altheide and Michalowski (1999), “fear travels in public discourse as it becomes associated with topics over a period of time” (p. 491). When the term “fear” is used in conjunction with certain topics—such as school crime and violence—“over time, with repeated usage, nuances blend, connotations become denotations, fringes mix with kernels, and we have a different perspective on the world” (Altheide and Michalowski 1999:491). As a result, the partnering and blending of “fear” with topics like children, youth and school have the potential to increase fear within the public. Figure 4.4, below, represents the number of times “fear” is used per year within the articles, compared with the news article frequency per year.

**Figure 4.4 News Article Frequency and Use of “Fear”**

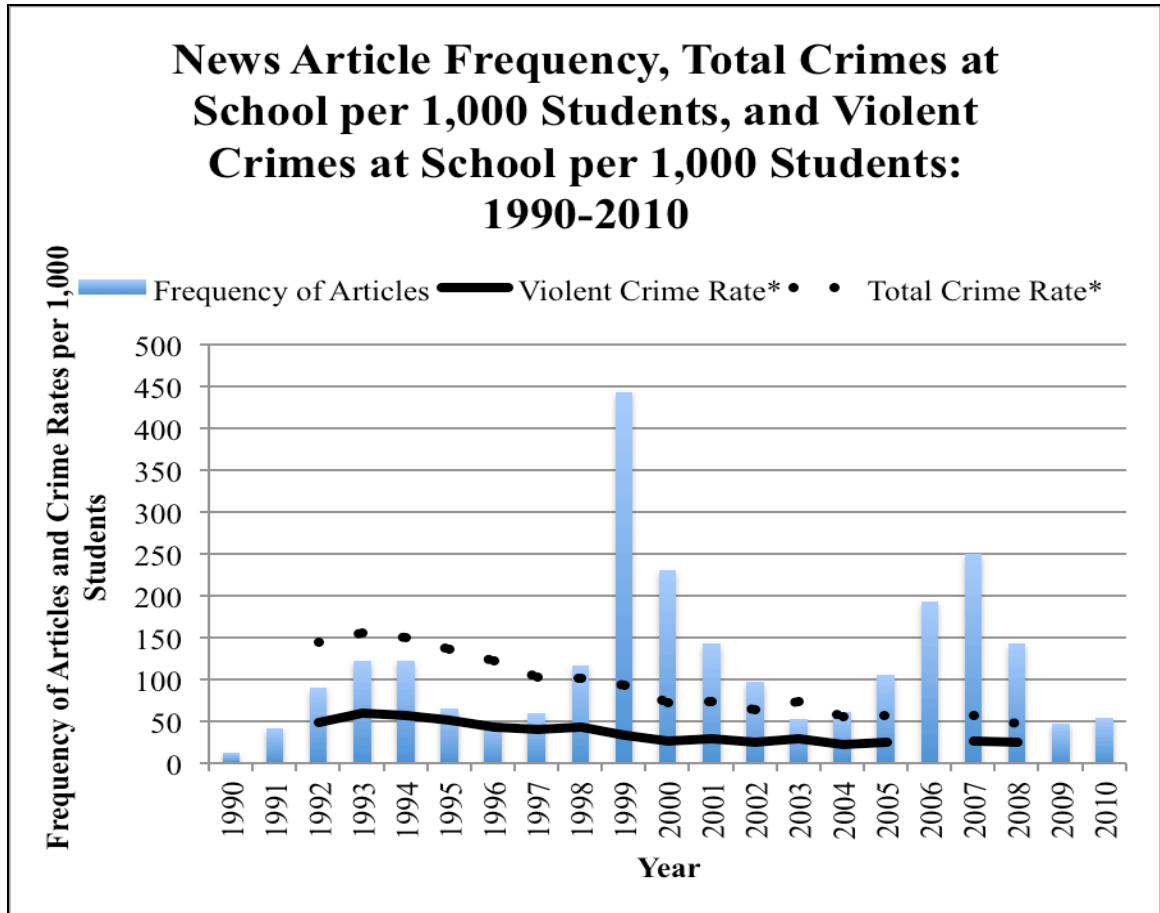


As Figure 4.4 shows, there is a peak in 1999 (the year of the Columbine school shooting) for both news article frequency as well as for use of the term “fear”. Prior to the massacre at Virginia Tech on April 16, 2007, which killed 32 people and wounded 25 others, the Columbine tragedy was the worst school shooting in US history. To date, the Columbine shooting is still the largest shooting tragedy in North America at the high school level. Not only has Columbine become a benchmark, or anchor, for the discussion of school violence (Kupchik and Bracy 2009), but the term “Columbine” has also become synonymous with fear. Altheide (2002) explores how fear and children have been aligned in the media over time, and argues that the repetitive joining of “fear” and “Columbine” in the media has been so thorough “that the term “Columbine” not only implies school but also fear, social control, and, above all, loss” (p. 234). It is important to note, however, that the use of the term “fear”, as presented in Figure 4.4, demonstrates a muted trend, at best. Similarly, the use of the term “fear” parallels the news article frequency; both are episodic in nature, and follow the cycle of the news. In this analysis, the term “fear” is not joined with reports of school crime and violence events as thoroughly as Altheide (2002) demonstrates it to be in his research. As a result, the use of “fear” in the media may not actually influence the public’s fear to any large extent.

Sacco (1995) points out that “the news provides a map of the world of criminal events that differs in many ways from the one provided by official crime statistics” (p. 143). Much existing research demonstrates that crime represented in the news does not parallel official statistics, such as police reports and other statistical measures of crime rates (see, for example, Fishman 1978; Heath 1984; Marsh 1991; Sacco 1995; Heath and

Gilbert 1996; Doi 1998; Lawrence and Mueller 2003; Doyle 2006). Figure 4.5, below, is a representation of news article frequency compared with the youth violence crime rate and total crime rate from 1990 to 2010, as reported in the National Center for Education Statistics' 2010 reports (Roberts et al. 2010). Even though the data are from the United States and not Canada, it is useful in this comparison. The media's representation of school crime is disproportionate to actual crime rates, focusing on the 'tip of the tip' of the triangle presented above, and "[b]ecause the media often distort crime by over representing more severe, intentional, and gruesome incidents, the public overestimates its frequency and often misperceives reality" (Heath and Gilbert 1996:371, as cited in Altheide and Michalowski 1999:479). This corresponds to claims made by Ericson (1991), that the mass media "not only make dramatic and cultural representations of reality, they participate in the construction of reality and of particular configurations for social relations" (p. 222). Thus, the media's episodic focus and creation of news waves about school crime and violence may, for some, create the perception that school crime and violence are rampant.

**Figure 4.5 Comparing Articles with Youth Violent Crime Rate and Youth Total Crime Rate**



\*Violent Crime Rate and Total Crime Rate are from the NCES report by Robers et al. 2012

Kupchik and Bracy (2009) examine how the articles in two American newspapers refer to Columbine, and find that there are two categories: the first utilizes Columbine as a “benchmark or comparison point for school violence” (p. 148), comparing current issues to the Columbine shooting; the second utilizes “casual references to Columbine [as] reminders about the potential for catastrophe at school” (p. 149). The results of the current media content analysis of articles on school crime and violence parallel these findings. Of the 653 articles (26.2%) that referred to school shootings within their report,

many linked commonplace forms of school crime or violence with a school shooting. For example: “It all starts with little fights and bullying. But what it all comes down to is deaths” (Campbell 1999:D7). When the media synthesize individual events, taking seemingly unconnected situations (such as fighting and bullying) and framing them as part of a broader issue (like death, or school shootings), they create the perception that events are accumulating and worsening. The use of ‘comparable cases’ (Vasterman 2005) is key to this synthesis: a particular item or event is connected to recent or past incidents (‘comparable cases’) that are – even remotely – related to it. Thus, individual cases become seen as examples of a more general situation. In this analysis, the media often utilize school shootings as ‘comparable cases’ or ‘benchmarks’ by either referring to school shootings explicitly by providing details about the incident, the perpetrator or the victim, or through the use of language such as “another Columbine” (Saunders 1999:A3), “Columbine-like plot” (Richer 2005:A9), “Columbine copy-cat” (Barton 2009:L4; Brown 2007:A09). Thus, Columbine serves as an anchor that is used in the public’s processing of information as it is presented by the media.

Similarly, links were made to school shootings that serve to remind us that school violence is present even when we least expect it, reminding readers about the “potential for catastrophe at school” (Kupchik and Bracy 2009:149). Some links to school shootings were made within otherwise positive articles, such as those about a new program or incentive to reduce school crime or violence. For example, an article about the “Go Girls” program, in which female role models are highlighted to improve the self-esteem and self-worth in young girls, makes mention of the Columbine school shooting. This positive

article, about improving self-esteem, relationships with parents and fellow students, and demonstrating to young girls that they can “change the world” by participating in this program, suddenly reminds us that “Rachel [Scott] was just 17 when she was killed in the Columbine School shooting on April 20, 1999” (St. Pierre 2008:G12). The media ensure that we never forget the looming dangers of school crime and violence. Many of the articles focus on issues such as fighting, bullying, threats of violence—considered conventional forms of school deviance, and generally non-newsworthy events—and make reference to school shootings, primarily Columbine. Other articles present the need for, or introduction of, anti-violence policies and make mention of school shootings; once again, primarily Columbine. The reader is left with the impression that if the policy or program change is not implemented quickly, we could have “another Columbine” on our hands.

As noted above, 653 articles (26.2%) made reference to school shootings, and most of them specifically made reference to Columbine. This focus on school shootings, and particularly the deaths that resulted from these tragic acts, could potentially increase fear and the perception of risk, especially considering that media reports of homicides have been demonstrated to have a strong effect on the fear of crime (Liska and Baccaglioni 1990:371).

## **ARTICLE CONTENT**

Both the quantity of coverage (in terms of number of articles and reporting trends over time), as well as the content of the articles (in terms of the framing processes and language use) can influence public perceptions of crime and violence (Gamson and



Modigliani 1989; Gamson 1992; Kupchik and Bracy 2009). Table 4.1, below, is a general representation of the percentage of articles within coding categories.

**Table 4.1 Media Reporting Characteristics within School Crime and Violence Articles**

<b>Characteristic</b>	<b>Articles (%)</b>
Location	
National (Canada)	74.0
Local	10.8
Article focus on incident occurring within the school	74.0
Article focus on incident occurring outside of the school	28.8
Focus	
School crime or violence are increasing	12.0
School crime or violence are decreasing	1.6
Article Frame	
Describing a particular school incident (episodic)	63.5
Anti-violence/crime policy	17.7
Anti-violence/crime program	9.6
Charges against perpetrator of school crime/violence	25.1
Trial for perpetrator of school crime/violence	14.8
Violence against women	3.9
Racial violence	5.9
School Shootings	
Articles about school shootings	16.1
Articles referring to previous school shootings	26.2

In Table 4.1, the different media frames and foci are outlined for the 2497 news articles that were collected and analyzed from January 1, 1990 through December 31, 2010. The numbers represent the percentage of articles in each category listed in the table. The categories are not exhaustive; additional frames were coded for that are not presented here, and some articles did not fit within any of the coding categories. Further, as many articles within the content analysis fit within multiple categories (for example, an article could focus on a particular school shooting, discuss an anti-violence/crime policy, and

also mention whether school crime or violence was increasing or decreasing), the categories are not mutually exclusive and therefore do not total 100%.

### ***Framing***

The spikes in the data that are based on school shootings indicate that the media's focus is episodic rather than thematic. Iyengar (1994) classifies news frames as either "thematic" or "episodic". He describes thematic frames as being broader in nature and focusing on: issues including crime and victimization rates (for a country or region); aspects of the criminal justice process including initiatives and policies; and governmental, community, or political responses to crime or violence. Thematic frames function to situate the issue, presenting it within a broader, more general context. Episodic frames, however, are much more specific, focusing on particular events or cases, or describing a specific incident of crime or violence. Episodic framing, according to Iyengar (1994) is used more often than thematic framing within news media reports.

Within the media content analysis, 911 articles (36.5%) were framed thematically, and included topics such as the *Young Offenders Act*, *The Safe Schools Act*, school codes of conduct, zero-tolerance policies, and gun control or gun laws. Therefore, episodic framing was, as Iyengar (1994) argues, utilized much more frequently than thematic framing. In fact, 1586 articles (63.5%) were episodic in nature, describing a particular incident of school crime or violence. These articles ranged in topic, from very commonplace school issues (such as arguments, fights or thefts on school property) to very serious issues (including bullying, suicide, bomb threats, sexual assaults, arson, stabbings, and school shootings). The majority of these articles focused on school

shootings, as discussed previously. By focusing on particular and seemingly random incidents, such as school shootings, as opposed to providing a more general context by focusing on topics such as national or local crime and victimization rates (which are quite low and infrequent), the media perpetuate the idea that school crime and violence can happen anywhere, at any time, to anyone. As a result, the media contribute to the perception that school crime and violence is a widespread phenomenon from which no one is immune.

### ***Local and Non-local Articles***

The use of both a local and a national newspaper account for Liska and Baccaglini's (1990) findings, that fear of crime is heightened when newspapers cover stories on local<sup>17</sup> crime, but fear of crime is reduced when newspapers cover national or international (nonlocal). Of the 2497 articles analyzed, 1529 of the articles (61%) were from *The Globe and Mail*, a Canadian national newspaper, and 968 of the articles (39%) were from a daily, local Canadian newspaper from the same area in which the schools under study are located. The majority of the articles (1847, or 74%) were about Canadian incidents of school crime or violence. The remaining 650 articles (26%) were primarily about incidents occurring within the United States (495 articles, or 19.8%), although there were numerous articles spanning various countries and continents<sup>18</sup>. However, only 269 articles (10.8%) of the articles were about local incidents. Thus, the media's focus on national and international incidents, as opposed to local incidents, indicates that the

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<sup>17</sup> For the purposes of this project, 'local' is defined as being in the same jurisdiction as the school board currently under examination.

<sup>18</sup> The remaining countries include: Afghanistan, Australia, Bosnia, Brazil, China, England, Finland, France, Germany, Indonesia, Iraq, Israel, Japan, Malaysia, Mexico, Nepal, The Netherlands, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Scotland, South Africa, South Korea, The United Kingdom, and Yugoslavia.

media's influence on the creation of fear among local residents may be minimal.

However, this chapter is only about the media's representation of school crime and violence, and not an attempt to test whether or not the media actually generate fear among local people.

### ***International and National Comparisons***

Many of the articles included statements that compared Canadian school crime and violence to that in other countries, particularly the United States. Numerous articles contained assertions that Canadian levels of school crime and violence would become similar to that of the United States if precautions were not put in place. For example: "But we must be prepared so that we don't head down the same road as the United States" (Sexton 1991:A6); "We don't want to have problems here like they do in the U.S. inner-city schools" (No Author 1993:T6); "We should work now so that we do not reach the situation you see in other countries like the United States" (Canadian Press 1994:A7); and "In only a few years, if nothing is done, Toronto will become as dangerous and as violent as Los Angeles, and then violence will be the reality for all of us" (Riutort 1996:A23). As suggested by Heath (1984) and Liska and Baccaglini (1990), media coverage of crime in other cities seems to make people feel "safe by comparison" (Liska and Baccaglini 1990:372). The phrasing of the above examples, which compare Canada to other, apparently more dangerous, countries, warn the public that they should be preparing for the worst even if they feel safe. Thus, the media may not be creating *fear*, per se, but instead influencing the public's perception of risk, encouraging the public to prepare for

the worst case scenario as they would with other extreme events like earthquakes, fires, and tsunamis.

However, some articles included proclamations that it was too late, and that Canada has “become the United States” (Wente 2008:A23) For example: “Lest we feel it is a problem of the U.S. only, let’s not forget the murder of the teenage boy at [the local mall] in our own city...” (Stevens 1998:A11) and “... police now view school violence as a crime trend imported from the United States to go along with car-jacking, drive-by shootings and other offences once foreign to Canada” (Wells 2001:A01). Here, the media can be seen to be generating fear, or increasing the public’s perception of risk, as they point to non-local events and claim that they are now occurring locally.

Similarly, many of the articles about local incidents of school crime and violence made direction mention of incidents in larger urban centers (particularly Toronto), or to incidents in other countries (again, particularly the United States). For example, “... I see it as an influence from Toronto, which in turn has been influenced by the gang warfare in the [United] States” (Kainz 1992:B8); “Let’s not wait until things get the way we hear they are in Toronto and in the United States” (McDonald 1993:B4); “His committee wants to prevent the kind of violent situations often reported in the United States, or even in Toronto, from happening here”(Cox 1993:B3); “But with violence and weapon use on the rise in Metro Toronto, it’s only a matter of time before such activity reaches Halton” (Boase 1993:T1). Again we can see the partnering of local and non-local issues, which can be indicative of the media generating fear among the public and influencing their perception of risk as they encourage the public to prepare for the worst.

Occasionally the articles included statements that local school crime and violence had reached levels that paralleled Toronto or the United States. For example, “When things are in Toronto ... or in the United States, it’s different. Now, it’s here and involved kids we knew, that we lived next door to” (No Author 1996:B1); “It’s a sad thing but it’s real and it’s not just in Toronto, it’s across Canada, and the word travels instantly” (Appleby 2008:A15). These are examples of what Cohen (2002) claims is a ‘cognitive shift’ that has occurred stemming from the Columbine school massacre. Whereas the public once thought, “how could it happen here?” they now think, “if it can happen *there*, it can happen *here*”. This cognitive shift may not necessarily be increasing fear in the public, but it does increase their risk perception, as it encourages them to take precautions to protect themselves from risk that may present itself in their own locale. Media reports of school crime and violence frequently contain quotes such as “Before it was in Colorado and now it’s in Canada. We don’t know if it will happen in our school” (Clairmont 1999:A1), and “... terrified a similar tragedy could happen in their hallways” (Cox 1999:A3), and “We’d like to think it couldn’t happen here. But we know it could happen anywhere” (Wheeler 1999:A1). This shift to “it can happen here,” combined with the perception that school crime and violence are entirely unpredictable and random, has the potential to create an inflated sense of risk in the public, thereby encouraging them to take precautions (such as increasing school security and implementing additional anti-violence/crime policies and programs).

### *Language*

The language that is utilized within the articles can facilitate the sensationalization and exaggeration of school crime and violence, and can influence the public's perception of the amount of school crime and violence, as well as their levels of fear. Although sensationalist language is appropriate for events such as school shootings (i.e. it would seem inappropriate to represent heinous events of mass murder where numerous individuals are killed or severely injured in mundane language), it is out of place when utilized for conventional school deviance, such as fighting or bullying. However, journalists often employ strong language to draw readers into the story. Numerous articles used sensationalist language to describe varying levels of school crime or violence. These descriptors included: "slaughter"; "relentless cycle of violence"; "mayhem"; "schoolyard melee"; "carnage"; "student arms race"; "sophisticated slaughter"; "schoolyard ambush", "reign of terror"; "mob attack"; "bloody high-school brawl"; "helter-skelter world"; and "death by school". The connotations associated with these terms are those of extreme violence and destruction, and are thus appropriate descriptors for extreme acts of school crime and violence, such as rampage school shootings. However this type of language is *not* relegated solely to news reports on extreme violence. For example, "reign of terror" was used to describe a group of high school females who were bullying and taking money from students at their school (No Author 1998:A1); "melee" was often used to describe school fights; and "helter-skelter world" was used in an article about parents sending their children to specialty martial arts and self-defense programs (No Author 1994:D10). When this type of language is used to describe all kinds of violence, more commonplace issues

are placed on par with extreme events causing death and destruction. This could, potentially, increase not only the public's perception of school crime and violence as being rampant and widespread, but could, potentially, also increase their fear and perception of risk.

Similarly, school crime and violence was often described in biological terms, including “epidemic”, “pandemic”, “outbreak”, and “virus”. In a discussion of school crime and violence, Cox (1993:B3) writes: “no school system is immune from it”, and Cernetig (1990) writes: “It’s like a virus crossing the country. And there is an outbreak everywhere.” The appropriation of health-related terms to describe school crime and violence serve as stark indicators of risk, and help to create a perception of risk within the public. Individuals express fear of disease and contamination very often (Glassner 1999), and take precautions to eliminate their personal risks of contagion. Linking school crime and violence to fearful and risky health-related events makes it seem as though school crime and violence is contagious and spreading. The term “epidemic” was utilized most frequently of all the health-related terms. In fact, it was used 41 times throughout the articles.

Other, non-biological terms were utilized more frequently. For example, “random” was used to describe school crime and violence 100 times; “rampage” was used 396 times, and “massacre” was used 492 times. The terms “rampage” and “massacre” were frequently used within articles discussing school shootings, however an incident where a teacher and four students received stab wounds was described as a “stabbing rampage” (No Author 2001:A9). The term “random” has much value in the news world:



“Themes relating to randomness serve the interests of both news workers and others who seek to frame crime problems. News stories about random crimes have great dramatic value ... news workers ... often stress the random nature of a particular form of victimization since problems must be seen as more urgent when everyone is threatened” (Sacco 1995:150). The term “random” leaves the reader to believe that there is no way to predict when or how school crime or violence could occur and, as a result, precautions must be taken to reduce this risk.

In terms of their focus, 300 articles (12%) describe school violence and crime as increasing. A mere 39 articles (1.6%) describe school crime or violence as decreasing. This is particularly interesting, given that rates of crime and violence have been decreasing for nearly a decade. As outlined in Chapter 1, recent Canadian data show that about one-tenth of all youth criminal code (excluding traffic) violations occur at school, and of those, only 30% involved assault and 20% were drug-related (Taylor-Butts and Bressan 2008). Furthermore, in Canada only 7% of all youth crimes on school grounds involved weapons, and of those, less than 1% involved firearms (Taylor-Butts and Bressan 2008). These figures have remained consistent over the years, according to police-reported data from 1998 to 2006 (Taylor-Butts and Bressan 2008). As demonstrated earlier, the media reports of school crime and violence are not reflective of current statistical trends, and instead present the image that there is an *increased* risk of school crime and violence. This parallels Kupchik and Bracy’s (2009) finding that “[t]hough school crime and violence are at historic lows, they are often presented ... as problems that are bad and/or getting worse” (p. 147).

Some of the articles that discuss decreasing levels of school crime or violence are written in a way that may leave the reader more concerned or fearful, despite these decreasing trends. As an example, an article from 2003 begins with the statement: “statistics say there are fewer fights in [U.S.] schools” (No Author 2003:A24). The remainder of the article focuses on the difference between females and males when fighting. However, after informing the reader that there are fewer fights, the majority of the article focuses on the severity and unpredictability of the fights that *do* occur: “charged with more emotion, these fights are often particularly intense and ugly” (No Author 2003:A24). Consequently, the reader is left with the message that they should be concerned about these “intense and ugly” fights, not the message that there are fewer fights in schools.

Similarly, an article from 2006 links statistical information about decreasing crime and violence with facts from the Dawson College shooting that occurred on September 13, 2006, only 3 days before the article was published. The article reports that a “Statistics Canada study, reported in July, 2006, showed crime concentrated in a few Montreal neighbourhoods, none near Dawson College in west-central downtown. The highest-density crime areas were in east-central, northern Montreal and Verdun” (Simpson 2006:A21). The juxtaposition of low crime rates with a school rampage leaves the impression that the risks are greater than the statistics would lead us to believe. The article continues with “[t]he same study showed that most perpetrators of violent crime don’t travel far; that the violent acts occur close to where they live. In this case, the perpetrator lived rather far away, on Laval Island rather than the island of Montreal”

(Simpson 2006:A21). The perception is that although crime rates are decreasing, or although violence is relegated to certain areas (according to statistics, at least), there is no place that is ever immune from random acts of violence. This, again, may increase individuals' perception of risk, and potentially increase their levels of fear.

### **MEDIA INFLUENCE ON FEAR**

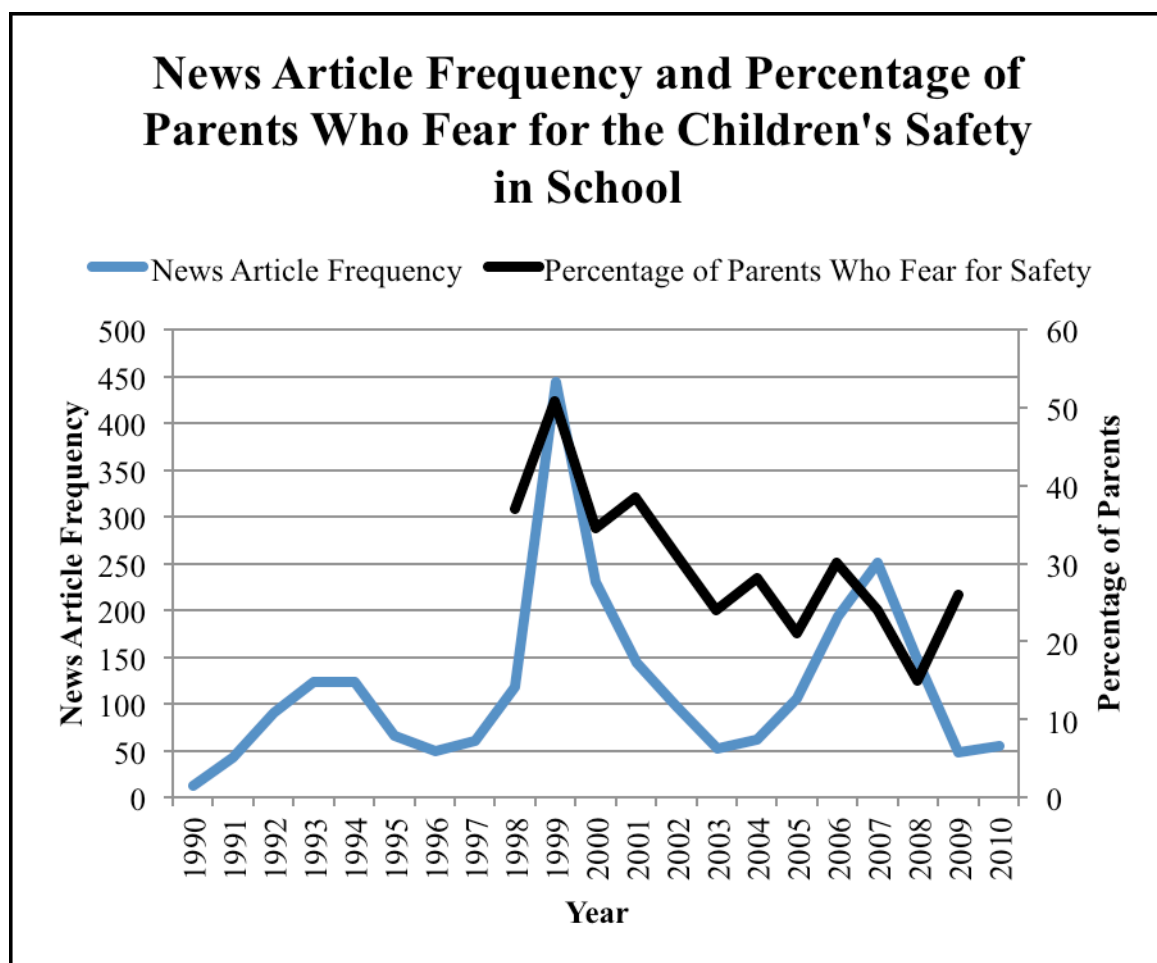
Gamson (1988) claims that what is present in media content can be considered an important “indicator of the general issue culture” (p. 170). The media play an active and important role in framing issues for the public, and thus influence what people think about. Similarly, since the majority of individuals have a minimal amount of direct experience with crime, public perceptions of crime and violence are often formed on the basis of information presented by the media (Stroman and Seltzer 1985; Warr 2000; Lawrence and Mueller 2003). Combs and Slovic (1979) state that “a substantial part of our experiences comes indirectly, through various forms of media exposure” (p. 837). In fact, studies have demonstrated that a vast majority of individuals polled utilize the mass media as their primary source of information about crime and criminals; in a National Crime Survey 96% of those surveyed made this claim (Stroman and Seltzer 1985; Flanagan and McGarrell 1986; Lawrence and Mueller 2003).

Similarly, public opinion about crime trends are reflections of how the media report crime and the amount of crime news, as opposed to reflecting actual crime rates (Davis 1952; Combs and Slovic 1979). Stroman and Seltzer (1985) claim that the public utilize information presented by the media in forming opinions and perceptions about any

given phenomenon; thus, content analyses are useful for examining the impact of media reports on public opinion.

In Figure 4.6, below, news article frequency is once again plotted, but in comparison with the results from a 2009 Gallup Poll exploring the percentage of parents who fear for the child’s safety while at school (Gallup 2009)<sup>19</sup>.

**Figure 4.6 News Article Frequency and Parental Fear**



Data Source: Percentage of Parents Who Fear for Safety, Gallup 2009

<sup>19</sup> Averages were calculated and plotted for the years where there were multiple surveys taken by Gallup (2009), including: 1999, 2000, 2001 and 2006.

Both parental fear and the frequency of news articles peaked in 1999, the year of the Columbine school shooting. Thus, we can see that both news article frequency *and* parental fear are relatively episodic and short lived. There is a correlation of 0.62 for the years where data is available for both news article frequency and percentage of parents who fear for their child's safety at school (1998-2009). Consequently, fear perception seemingly responds to media-generated focus, and both fear perception and media focus are concentrated on specific events (in this case, the Columbine school shooting in 1999). Additionally, the overall decrease in parental fear after Columbine demonstrates that parents are not necessarily more fearful overall; their fear is relatively short-lived, and based on specific events.

It should be noted that the Gallup Poll results are from American citizens. As explained in Chapter 3, Mazzuca (2002a; 2000b) reports that when Canadians and Americans are polled about school violence and how it can be prevented, their opinions about causes and solutions are quite similar. Additionally, researchers have demonstrated that news media outlets play off of one another, influencing what is reported, and that “media outlets share perspectives on news and look to each other for guidelines about formats, topics and emphases” (Altheide and Michalowski 1999:485). Thus, Canadian papers, including those utilized in this study, likely take many of their cues from other newspapers, including those in the United States. Altheide and Michalowski (1999) further elaborate that certain crime topics that may begin in one location may seep into news coverage in other cities or regions even if the incidents of that particular crime has not increased in those locations.

Similarly, Canadians regularly consume news stemming from the United States—whether watching American television news reports, or consuming Canadian news that reports on American content, such as the rampage school shootings at Columbine High School and Virginia Tech—and this can influence their perceptions. In addition, many of these news reports are shared among members of the Associated Press, which has over 3,700 employees in more than 300 worldwide locations (Associated Press, N.d.). Thus, we can assume that the parental fear exhibited by American citizens as demonstrated in the Gallup Poll (2009) results is analogous to Canadian citizens’ parental fear; as a result, we can assume that Canadian parents’ fear is also relatively episodic and short lived, stemming from specific events and media-generated focus.

## **CONCLUDING THOUGHTS**

Although this chapter does not attempt to predict whether local residents’ fear is influenced by the media, the media analyses presented here do indicate that public fear—in general—may be heightened by the media’s reporting of school crime and violence, but that it will be short-lived. In general, the media’s episodic focus on the ‘tip of the tip’ of the triangle—school shootings—combined with the use of the term fear, the number of articles on school crime and violence that far outweigh the statistical trends and data, and the language used within the articles may perpetuate a perception of risk and fear among the public. Just as the majority of individuals who have not witnessed acts of crime or violence rely on the media to form their perceptions of it (Stroman and Seltzer 1985; Warr 2000; Lawrence and Mueller 2003), those outside of the school walls often rely on the media to understand what is going on inside. However, the media’s focus on the ‘tip

of the tip' of the triangle occurs rather episodically, as news cycles often do; when there is a rare event or extreme case of school violence (such as a school shooting), the newsworthiness of the event will generate increased media attention, and may generate fear that is short-lived, as demonstrated above in Figure 4.6.

This is in direct contradiction to Glassner's (1999) and Furedi's (2002) presentation of the culture of fear. They argue that the media's disproportionate and exaggerated focus on severe instances of crime and violence lead to increased public fear. However, as demonstrated above, this fear—if it is generated at all—exists at relatively low levels, is quite short-lived, and parallels the media's reporting on high-profile and justifiably newsworthy events.

This chapter is not intended to test whether local individuals experience heightened fear of crime or violence as a result of the media's attention. Instead, the intention is to present the findings from a large-scale, long-term media analysis that helps account for the sheer volume and 'mass quality' of the mass media. This analysis has gone above and beyond most media analyses, providing a thorough account of 20 years worth of data. The results of the media analysis alone may lead us to believe that the media may inflate the public's fear of school crime and violence (even for a short time), while simultaneously perpetuating the idea that events of extreme crime and violence occur within schools quite often. But a media analysis does not present the whole picture. I have taken a more holistic approach, engaging in 66 interviews with key players within the schools, including students, parents, teachers and administrators. The findings indicate that individuals within the schools are not, in fact, fearful about school crime and

violence. This will be explored in the following chapter. It may be that those outside of the school, whose only information about school crime and violence is from media reports, have a different perception than those involved with schools on a regular basis.



## **CHAPTER 5: EXPLORING THE CULTURE OF FEAR**

In this chapter I examine the culture of fear as put forth by Glassner (1999) and Furedi (2002). Although Glassner and Furedi provide anecdotal evidence to demonstrate the components of the culture of fear, this chapter serves to outline the core components that are required for a culture of fear to exist, I provide empirical evidence garnered by means of personal interviews, the Safe Schools Survey, and media content analyses, which reveals that the culture of fear theory can be applied to the issue of school crime and violence.

To begin, the major components of the culture of fear thesis as presented by Glassner (1999) and Furedi (2002) are examined, including: *minimal variation* in the perception of fear; fear of the *randomness* of school crime and violence; the *pervasive* nature of the fear of school crime and violence; *exaggeration* of the issue and *disproportionate* responses to school crime and violence; the *media influence* in the creation of this fear; and the *institutionalized responses* that the Ontario Ministry of Education have taken to curb school crime and violence. This theory works best for identifying the major mechanisms that can lead to sustained fear at a cultural level, and for identifying the intensity of that fear; for example, whether there is large scale fear, verging on a moral panic, or if the fear is relatively low-level and manageable, which is what will be demonstrated within this chapter. The low levels of fear that I have found are a significant point of departure from the culture of fear theory as it is presented by Glassner (1999) and Furedi (2002). They repeatedly present high levels of fear with very minimal variation, however I will demonstrate that while minimal variation in the perception of fear is, in fact, present, the

fear itself seems to exist only at very low, manageable levels, and may presents itself more as a risk than a fear, per se.

In this chapter, I will address the hypothesis that the disjuncture between the perception and prevalence of school crime and violence stems from an overarching fear, which is pervasive, consistent, decoupled from the ecology of school crime, and largely stems from the mass media. I will also address three sub-hypotheses: 1) Fear should be pervasive across school jurisdictions (across different schools and different stakeholders in school hierarchies), with little ecological variation by actual prevalence of school violence; 2) Participants should fear that violence will occur randomly, rather than predictably, as in ecologies of crime; and 3) Media reports of school crime should be highly prevalent and sensationalist.

### **MINIMAL VARIATION IN PERCEPTION OF FEAR**

In order for a culture of fear to be present, there must be a consistent amount of fear reported, regardless of the individuals' position within the school and of the school attended. The majority of the interview respondents report that they feel safe at school, or report that they feel safe sending their children to school. Thus, it seems that the general level of fear is quite low among interview respondents. Although some individuals did report specific incidents of crime and violence occurring at their school (or their child's school), respondents nevertheless report feeling safe personally, or feeling that their children are safe while they are at school. For example, Edward, the parent of two students (a grade 11 student at Agrestic High, and a grade 12 student at West Beverly High) said:

*There was a knife-wielding incident at [Agrestic High] that sticks in our mind as parents, and there was a bomb scare once at [West Beverly High] that sticks in your mind. Despite that, I still feel like [my children are] very safe. I don't think you're going to get a four-year stretch where nothing goes on in a school; some kind of threatening activity. But, it's definitely not routine. I can think of one at each school. But it's not enough to make me think that they're walking into a death trap every day.*

Regardless of the school attended, all but one of the sixty-six interview respondents<sup>20</sup> reported feeling safe at school (as a student, teacher, or administrator), or feeling safe sending their children to school. For example, when asked what makes him feel safe at school, Raymond (a grade 11 student at Capeside High School) said, “*I just know that there's nothing that would be of any danger to me*”. The fact that the majority of respondents report feeling safe at school indicates that the fear of school crime and violence exists at relatively low levels, and that that there are wider cultural and societal influences are impacting the schools' policies and procedures; those on the front lines (students, teachers, administrators and parents) are not actively calling for changes to the schools' safety policies and procedures. Therefore, it seems as though fear of school crime and violence is generated from external forces (for example, the media and policy makers), and that the safety responses being implemented are not a response to individual fear stemming from those within the schools itself.

Many respondents were hesitant when asked if they felt safe at school, but stated that their hesitancy was only because they had not thought about their own safety at school before. As one respondent, Lilly (a teacher at Sweet Valley High School) noted,

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<sup>20</sup> One student reported that she did not feel safe at school. However, the student was unable to explain why she did not feel safe, or provide specific times or locations that made her feel unsafe. Based on the rest of her answers—all of which were discounted—the student seemed to be telling the interviewers what she thought they wanted to hear.

*“I’ve never thought about it before, that’s all. The hesitation is because I’ve never really thought about it”*. In fact, as the interview respondents were asked to think about their safety at school and specify what made them feel safe or unsafe, many respondents began statements with phrases like *“Now that I’m thinking about it ...”*. Thus, until they were forced to think concretely about their personal safety, or the personal safety of their children, school crime and violence had not been a concern for most of these individuals. Furthermore, some parents said that they had not discussed the issue of school crime or violence with their children, as neither parent nor child had any concern with the topic. For example, Edward, the parent of two students (a grade 11 student at Agrestic High School and a grade 12 student at West Beverly High), said, *“in general, it’s not a huge topic of conversation in this house, because I think they feel safe”*. Again, these are indicators of a relatively low-level of fear, and demonstrate a general lack of concern from parents, teachers, and students about school crime or violence.

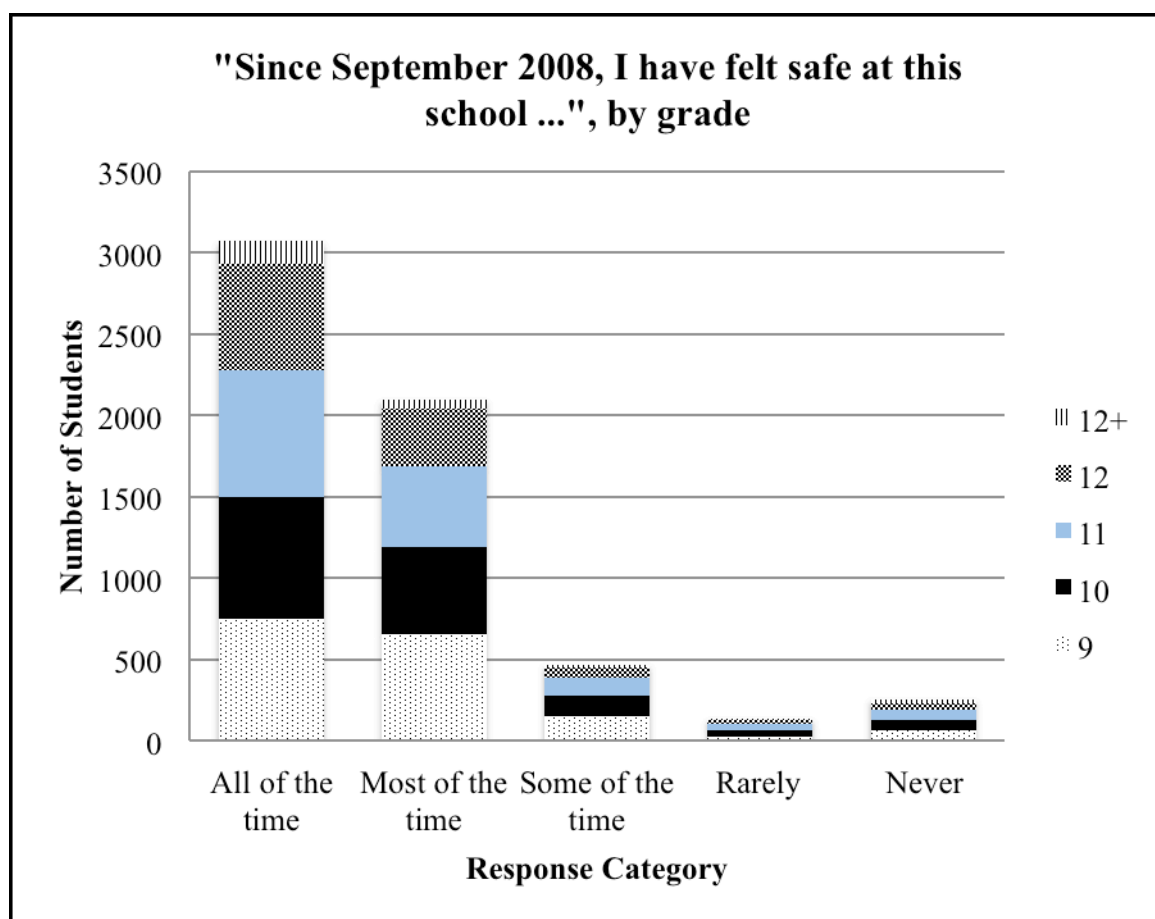
Data from the Safe Schools Survey (Vaillancourt 2010) demonstrate a similar trend, revealing that of the 6033 respondents to the question “Since September 2008, I have felt safe at this school”, 86% (n=5171) answered that they felt safe at their school “all of the time” or “most of the time”. An additional 8% (n=471) selected “some of the time”. Only 6% (n=391) selected “rarely” or “never”. This is quite consistent with the interview data, with the majority of respondents from both the interviews and the Safe Schools Survey indicating that they feel safe at school. Additionally, these data are consistent with public opinion polls: as outlined in Chapter 1, Lyons (2005) demonstrates that 80% of teenagers either “agree” or “strongly agree” that they feel safe at school.

It is also important to explore whether students' amount of fear differs by grade; if individuals report consistent amounts of fear regardless of their position within the school, that is an indicator of the culture of fear. No variation was found with regard to the individual's position in the school: administrators, teachers, students and parents all reported feeling safe equally. Mia, a teacher at Shermer High School, said that "*I've always felt safe ... there's always altercations that happen, but the safety of the teachers I don't think is every really in jeopardy. Or, we never feel like it is*". Similarly, Jeremy (a teacher at Liberty High School) said he has "*always*" felt safe at school, and added that he has "*never had a moment when I didn't [feel safe]*". Additionally, when the Safe School Survey responses to the question "Since September 2008, I have felt safe at this school" broken down by grade show us that: 45.4% of grade 9s, 49.5% of grade 10s, 52.4% of grade 11s, 57.9% of grade 12s, and 55.5% of grade 12+ students report feeling safe at school "all of the time" (See Figure 5.1, below). The relationship between feeling safe at school "all of the time" and grade level is statistically significant at the 0.001 level.

There is only a 12.5 % difference between grade 9s and grade 12s, which indicates that there is relatively minimal variation in the number of students who report feeling safe "all of the time". According to May and Dunaway (2000), grade level is inversely related to fear: older students often feel safer than younger students, as they have maturity (both physical and emotional) on their side, and are therefore better able to navigate the intricacies of the school's social hierarchy. Interview respondents expressed this inverse relationship as well. For example, Craig (a grade 12 student at Capeside High School) said that "*As you get into the older grades, you feel more secure [at school]. But... like,*

*grade nine, you're just getting there and everything's new, so it's hard*". Similarly, Elizabeth (a grade 11 student at Agrestic High School) said that for *"the first few weeks you're kind of nervous, but after that you are just like, there is absolutely nothing wrong with going to high school"*. Students in higher grades tend to report feeling safer than those in lower grades, however the majority of students in *all* grades report feeling safe while at school. Thus, while there is a low-level of fear among those in younger grades, it is not necessarily a result of school crime and violence, but is a more generalized fear about the significant changes that occur when one moves into a high-school setting.

**Figure 5.1 Students' Feelings of Safety, by Grade and Response**



Data Source: Safe Schools Survey

### *Ecological Variation*

Further, it is important to explore whether students' fear differs by school; if consistent amounts of fear are reported regardless of the school attended, that is an indicator of the culture of fear. As previously noted, all but one of the sixty-six interview respondents reported feeling safe at school (as a student, teacher, or administrator), or feeling safe sending their children to school, regardless of the school attended. Thus, even though some schools have experienced some more severe acts of crime and violence or are located in more dangerous areas or neighbourhoods (those with higher crime rates and increased social disorganization), students, parents and administrators nevertheless report feeling safe. Ecological variation—or the amounts of crime and violence that are present at varying levels depending on the school—does not seem to play a role in the interview respondents' fear levels.

The school board under examination does not have a history rife with violence, however two severe acts did occur. In 2005, a group of young men entered Agrestic High School armed with deadly weapons<sup>21</sup>, and attacked one of the school's sports teams during their after-school practice. In 2008, a Bayside High School student was stabbed on the first day of school. These two events were frequently reported on by the media (see the section, Media Influence, below, for further details) and were repeatedly referenced by interview respondents. Nevertheless, respondents from within this school board still report feeling safe. In fact, respondents who attend Agrestic High School and Bayside High School report that their schools are still safe places for students, teachers and

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<sup>21</sup> No firearms were involved in either of these incidents of extreme violence and no fatalities were incurred.

administrators, in spite of these serious events occurring. For example, Edward, the parent of two students (a grade 11 student at Agrestic High School and a grade 12 student at West Beverly High), said that even though there had been an armed attack at his daughter's school, "*[the kids] don't think of it, they don't even bat an eye going to school in the morning, whether they're going to come out alive or anything*". At Bayside High School, where the stabbing occurred in 2008, students responding to the Safe Schools Survey report feeling safe. In response to the question "Since September 2008, I have felt safe at this school", 46% of the student respondents from Bayside High School said they felt safe "all of the time", 34% said they felt safe "most of the time", and 8% responded "some of the time". Only 12% of students responded that they felt safe "rarely" or "never" at Bayside High School. Similarly, in response to the same question, 53% of the student respondents from Agrestic High School said they felt safe "all of the time", 33% said they felt safe "most of the time", and 7% responded "some of the time". Only 6% of students responded that they felt safe "rarely" or "never" at Agrestic High School. Thus, even though there was an act of extreme violence at each of these schools, the majority of the students nevertheless report feeling safe.

Interview respondents repeatedly made statements that contradicted the idea of ecological variation; instead, they maintained that all schools are the same. Laura, a Parent Council Member and parent of two students (a grade 11 student at Agrestic High and a grade 12 student at West Beverly High) said "*There are issues at every high school ... Every school's the same ... I think every school has their same issues. I think there are problems at every school and not one school is better than the other*". Mia, a teacher at



Shermer High School, said “*I think there are bad kids and good kids at every school ... But, you know from school to school, there’s always issues. And I think they’re all pretty similar*”. Kristen, a teacher at Bayside High School, said “*It happens everywhere—violence happens everywhere—and it’s unfortunate that certain schools carry a reputation that isn’t true*”. Although these statements link to the idea of randomness (a component of the culture of fear that will be discussed further below), they also demonstrate that respondents continue to report feeling safe regardless of a school’s identification (formally or informally) as being ‘high risk’ or ‘low risk’ for violence, regardless of the school’s location (rural or urban neighbourhoods), and regardless of the school’s history of violence.

### ***Schools are Safe***

When asked whether they felt safer at school or at home, most respondents indicated that they felt equally safe in either location. For example, Summer (a grade 10 Student at Capeside High School) said, “*I like both of them. I feel safe there, and at home. Like there’s no danger at school or anything*” and Thomas (a grade 10 student at Breaker High) said “*It’s all the same. Like, I feel safe at school, and I still feel safe at home and everything*”. In fact, Craig (a grade 12 student at Capeside High School) said that he would actually feel safer at school than at home, because at school “*there’s a lot of rules in place, more authoritative figures, so it would be easy to find someone who could help me [if I needed it]*”.

Like Craig, some respondents reported feeling safer at their school than in other social locations. For example, Kristen, a teacher at Bayside High School said she feels

safer during work hours at the school, because “*situations are more controlled at work as opposed to out in the ‘real world’ where people can take your car or break in or stuff like that*”. Respondents mentioned numerous reasons that they felt safe at school, especially in comparison to other locations, such as the presence of teachers and administrators as trustworthy adults ready to intervene if a situation were to arise. Similarly, the community aspect of the school (i.e., a close-knit feeling among students and teachers) played a role. For the majority of the interview respondents, the protective factors associated with schools far outweighed any potential risk for crime or violence. Therefore, regardless of the school attended, the individual’s position within the school, or the school’s history of crime and violence, it is apparent that there is minimal variation in the perception of fear. Although this satisfies the first condition necessary for demonstrating the presence of a culture of fear, it also demonstrates that any fear that is present only exists at very low levels.

## **RANDOMNESS**

In order for a culture of fear to be present, there must be fear that all students, at all schools, are potential victims; simultaneously, there must be fear that all students, at all schools, are potential perpetrators. In essence, there must be fear of the *randomness* of the event. Laura, a Parent Council Member and parent of two students (a grade 11 student at Agrestic High and a grade 12 student at West Beverly High) said that when

*students that are expelled out of one school, they basically get shifted around and every school gets them. Every school expels students, and every school gets students. So I know West Beverly High has a few at their school that I wouldn’t necessarily call great students, and that I guess they have to keep an eye on. So they’re everywhere. Every school is the same.*

Laura's opinion that "every school is the same" is an indicator of a fear of randomness and unpredictability: regardless of the actual incidents that occur at any one particular school, there is a potential for violence and crime at any school, at any time. Thus, there is a strong element of randomness involved. However, there are two types of randomness that are at play: on one hand, individuals may feel that there is a high probability of danger occurring, and fear that they could at any time become a victim. This type of fear would change individuals' behaviours, as they would take precautions to protect themselves from the dangers of victimization at all costs. On the other hand, common sense dictates that danger often occurs in a random and unpredictable nature (whether it be danger from an earthquake, car accident, or act of school violence), but that there is a very low probability of the action occurring. This type of random fear is to be expected, and should not change individuals' behaviours as there is an unlikely chance of the danger actually occurring.

This second type of randomness was highlighted by many individuals, teachers and students alike. Some respondents clearly identified that they did not think that a severe act of violence could occur at their own school, but followed up by stating that it could happen anywhere, at any school, at any time. For example, Carley (a grade 12 student at Liberty High School), said "*I think that [students are] just unaware of what could actually happen, because it's never happened to us before ... It could happen anywhere, even [Liberty High School], and people are just like 'no, it would never happen there, it's a good school'. But, it could. Very much so*". Similarly, Ashley, the parent of a grade 11 student at Eastland High School, said "*I think a lot of parents*

*disregard it, or don't think it could ever happen here. And I think that's exactly why it could happen here*". Thus, the respondents indicate that even though they feel safe at their own school, they recognize the potential that random acts of violence could occur anywhere, at any time. It should be noted, though, that most of the respondents also discussed the low probability of these actions occurring, indicating that they recognize a potential for random victimization, but do not necessarily *fear* it.

According to the culture of fear hypothesis, if individuals believe that risks are entirely random they adopt a 'precautionary approach' to their lives, believing that it is better to be 'safe than sorry' in their daily actions and interactions. This precautionary approach speaks to the first type of randomness, that there is a high probability of danger at any given moment. Statements made by interview respondents highlight that precautions are in place to protect students and teachers, but that random acts can still occur. For example, Mia, a teacher at Shermer High School, said

*the thing is, things could happen – you can only do so many precautionary things to make yourself feel safe, or to make the environment safe. I mean, things are still going to happen no matter what, and you have no control over it. Like, if someone has a bad day, or if someone decides to walk into the school, someone will decide to walk into the school and do things.*

Although precautions are in place to protect individuals from random dangers, administrators, teachers, students and parents report feeling safe, and do not report changing their behaviours to accommodate their fear. This demonstrates that individuals believe there is a low probability of the occurrence of school crime and violence. Ferraro (1995) notes that there is a difference between perceiving risk and being fearful: even though people take precautions on a daily basis to avoid situations that they perceive as

being risky (e.g., not driving when the weather is bad), these are not necessarily situations that are ‘feared’. Thus, the precautions that individuals take to protect themselves may be a means of risk avoidance, but may not be a response to fear.

Respondents also indicate that the random nature of these events exists regardless of the actual level of safety at the school or in the neighbourhood. Lilly, a teacher at Sweet Valley High, said “*I think it would be ignorant to say that it couldn’t happen anywhere ... So, just because our school is really nice, and we’re really lucky, and we have such great kids, it doesn’t mean we should be ignorant to say that it couldn’t happen here*”. Lesley, another teacher at the same school said:

*I feel safe, like I live in a community that I feel really safe in, and I feel really safe most places that I go, however I do worry about things like, violence seems to be a bit more random now. Like, you can look at somebody the wrong way, and they pull out a knife and they stab you ... And that’s more what scares me, is the randomness of a lot of stuff ... there’s that potential of other things happening, and one of the things that I talk to my students a lot about is that, you know, you have to be careful, you may be a really strong kid and skilled with fighting, but you’re not skilled when it comes to a knife or when it comes to a gun. And you don’t know who has access to those things any more. And I think that that’s maybe more the thing that scares me, is the randomness of it all. It’s not as premeditated anymore, you know?*

Therefore, the fact that interview respondents describe feeling safe while they are at school does not preclude them from believing in the random nature of violence, and feeling as though anything can happen, at anytime, anywhere. However, the randomness that is discussed is that of a common-sense nature: individuals recognize that there is a possibility of danger or risk, but that it is rather unlikely to occur. Although the fact that individuals are attuned to the random nature of school crime and violence is an indicator

of the culture of fear, the recognition that there is a low probability of danger demonstrates that fear exists only at a relatively low level.

### **PERVASIVENESS**

In order for a culture of fear to be present, safety measures must be based on *perceived* risk or fear, not actual violent incidents. Interview respondents recognized that many of the policies and procedures that have been implemented at their school are a result of violence that has occurred elsewhere. For example, Carley, a grade 12 Student at Liberty High School, stated: “*They just started doing it [lockdowns] when I was in grade 11, because of what happened at the Sheridan University*”. The incident that Carley is referring to occurred in 2008, when a man carrying a tripod on the Sheridan campus caused the campus to be locked down for over three hours, as witnesses thought the tripod was actually a long gun (De Lazzer 2008:A01). This preventative lockdown at Sheridan University, and the implementation of mandatory lockdown procedures at all local schools within the school board under examination, are based on the idea that violence on campus is widespread. The very fact that the witnesses believed that the tripod was a long gun speaks to the culture of fear: as the media report on instances of extreme violence (as demonstrated in Chapter 4), individuals may begin to see innocent items and actions as violent items and actions; in this case, a student’s tripod was mistaken for a weapon. This is also a component of confirmatory bias. As Nickerson (1998) demonstrates, confirmation bias can allow people to see what they are looking for. The fact that a tripod was misinterpreted as a long gun shows that individuals perceive objects and actions dependent on their current hypotheses about the world.

Meaghan, the parent of a grade 12 student at Bayside High School, said

*What do I think about lockdowns? I suppose, it's unfortunate in this day and age that we even have to think about it. I think some areas in this province have more issues about it than others, but you know what, for the safety of the school, if there's a situation going on, then maybe it's not a bad thing that they do it. I mean, I hate the fact that we are, even in this day and age, that we even have to think about it. But, for the safety of the students, I suppose... yeah, I guess it's for their safety.*

Here, Meaghan's statement that some areas in Ontario have issues more so than others demonstrates the idea that these policies and procedures are implemented based on perceived risk, not on actual events occurring at individual schools. Additionally, Meaghan does not seem convinced that these procedures are effective; she says "I guess" multiple times, as though she is attempting to rationalize their effectiveness.

Similarly, the sheer implementation of these policies—specifically lockdown policies—has led to the feeling that extreme acts of violence and crime are random and pervasive. For example, Carley (a grade 12 student at Liberty High) said that lockdown drills make students feel less safe while they are at school, and added that "*there's even more of a risk for something else to happen, which is why they have to do that, right?*". These policies, which are applied regardless of the individual school's propensity for violence or crime, are rationalized as a means of reducing risk within schools. But they serve an additional function: that of creating fear. In a sense, there is a feedback loop that is created, where the very tools that are implemented to reduce risk actually intensify the perception of risk. Similarly, the sheer number of policies and procedures that have been implemented within Ontario over the past 20 or so years also indicates pervasiveness. Although the number of actual incidents of violence and crime within schools is low (as

outlined in Chapter 1), the number of policies and procedures that are being implemented to curb the issue are growing, and they are growing rapidly. This may also have a ‘feedback loop effect’, and is explored further, below.

### **EXAGGERATION AND DISPROPORTION**

In order for a culture of fear to be present, the implementation of protective measures must outweigh the actual risk of violence. Similarly, claims of “epidemic” levels of violence must be present. As demonstrated earlier in this dissertation, the actual risk of violence in schools is quite low. Recent Canadian data show that about one-tenth of all youth criminal code (excluding traffic) violations occur at school, and of those, only 30% involved assault and 20% were drug-related (Taylor-Butts and Bressan 2008). Furthermore, in Canada only 7% of all youth crimes on school grounds involved weapons, and of those, less than 1% involved firearms (Taylor-Butts and Bressan 2008). Additionally, the rates of youth crime and violence occurring in school or on school property are well below those rates of youth crime and violence occurring during out-of-school hours and off of school property. These figures have remained consistent over the years, according to police-reported data from 1998 to 2006 (Taylor-Butts and Bressan 2008). In general: actual rates of school crime and violence are much lower than rates of youth crime and violence; they have remained low and relatively stable over the long term; and the proportions of all crime that is severe is low at all levels (on school or off of school property). However, the responses that Ontario schools have undertaken—including the implementation of mandatory lock-down procedures, having armed police



officers in over 20 schools, and having security cameras in all high schools—are highly disproportionate to the low levels of school crime and violence that occur.

Similarly, as demonstrated in Chapter 4, the media report of school crime and violence utilize sensationalist language quite often, with headlines about “epidemics” of violence, “school slaughters”, “rampage shootings” and “death tolls at schools rising”. The framing of school crime and violence in the news media follow news cycles stemming from newsworthy but rare events such as school shootings. Compared with the actual rates of school crime and violence, the media’s portrayal of actual school dangers is much more prevalent than the actual risk. See Chapter 4 for a thorough discussion of the media’s portrayal of school crime and violence.

When interview respondents discuss actual events of crime and violence that occur on school property, they focus on petty issues such as smoking, drugs, fighting and theft. This is in line with the data: as outlined in Chapter 4, Mayer and Furlong (2010) argue that behaviours that are considered to be that of ‘school violence’ comprise only a small portion of the overall pattern of negative social events that occur at school. In fact, the majority of school behaviours consist of “appropriate, positive and engaged behaviors,” with another large portion of behaviours that are considered “marginally acceptable behaviours,” such as those that may be disruptive but are not considered dangerous, including smoking, drugs, fighting and theft (Mayer and Furlong 2010:17). See Figure 4.3, in Chapter 4, for a visual representation of all school behaviours.

Other than the two aforementioned events of extreme violence that have occurred within the schools under study, all of the examples of behavioural incidents provided by

interview respondents were quite minor. For example, Anna, the parent of four students at Capeside High School, said “*I’m not so much worried about the violence part of things, but I do think that there’s lots of drugs—way too many drugs—and I mean drinking some, for sure, but definitely lots of pot smoking*”. Similarly, Edward, the parent of two students (a grade 11 student at Agrestic High, and a grade 12 student at West Beverly High), reported that the disciplinary issues at both schools are

*petty things ... I would say I’ve heard far and few between stories of real petty types of discipline problems, the odd odd odd fight and suspension. And I guess that would be true for both schools. Little things here and there. Yeah. I would say in general, no. If any, they’re just the normal things that you would expect when that many people are together for that many hours a day.*

Thus, the issues facing most schools are not severe, and may not even be on the radar at some schools. As Mark, a teacher at Sunnydale High School—which is a school with a reputation of being quite violent and dangerous—noted, “*the whole thing you’re talking about [school crime and violence] is just a relatively small part of [teaching]. It’s a very – it’s almost invisible at times*”. Mark’s statement is directly in line with Mayer and Furlong’s (2010) claim that school violence is only a minimal portion of a constellation of behaviours. Thus, the focus on school crime and violence as a serious issue facing all schools is quite exaggerated and disproportionate to what is actually occurring.

## **MEDIA INFLUENCE**

In order for a culture of fear to be present, there must be a focus on the most violent acts (i.e. school shootings), or grieving individuals, and this focus must lead to political and legislative activity to curb the problem. Many respondents (primarily parents, teachers and administrators) reported that the media has influenced perceptions

of school crime and violence. The prevalence of media in our lives—the newspaper, television, the internet, and even phones where we can access news at any moment—allows for news to travel quickly, and to travel far. This, according to some respondents, has increased the amount of attention surrounding school incidents. For example, Laura, a Parent Council Member and parent of two students (a grade 11 student at Agrestic High and a grade 12 student at West Beverly High) said

*But you know what? I suppose back then there were situations that may have arisen with students—with people that came into the school that may not have necessarily gone to the school—and, who knows if they were carrying a knife, or maybe carrying something and were looking for a particular student, but just kind of wandered in and wandered back out. It's very different now. Everything's out in the open. Everything's talked about. Everything's in the news. Back then, maybe not as much.*

In essence, Laura is indicating that what is occurring in schools is not necessarily new, but what is new is the way the media report on it, and correspondingly the way schools deal with it. Jason, the principal of Agrestic High School, added that “[the media] glamorize it. They want to sell newspapers. So the first time that something happens, we're on the front page.” As the media follow the adage ‘if it bleeds, it leads’ and focus on instances of severe school crime and violence, often reporting with inflammatory language and at rates disproportionate to their actual occurrence, this may create the perception that events of school crime or violence are occurring much more frequently than they actually are. See Chapter 4 for a thorough discussion of the media’s portrayal of school crime and violence

The media tend to focus on individual schools, particularly after a specific act of crime or violence. For example, after both incidents of extreme violence within the school

board under study, the schools that experienced the events were in the media for quite some time. This focus can tarnish the reputation of the school, and can leave the public feeling that these schools are unsafe. The focus on particular schools may be a result of confirmatory bias mechanisms. Since individuals may notice behaviours they ‘expect’, so too may the media focus on behaviours that are ‘expected’ from schools that are considered violent, dangerous, or otherwise ‘high risk’. Any evidence that supports this categorization will be sought out, essentially confirming the ‘high risk’ label. For example, Jason, the principal of Agrestic High School, said that after the attack on the school’s sports team, which was on

*the front pages ... [Agrestic High School]’s always had that kind of reputation since then. That’s kind of unfair. Why does a school have to be characterized like that? Because it gives the wrong impression. And we’ve spent the last four or five years trying to get back the confidence of kids. A lot of kids didn’t come our way because of it, via grade eight. So yeah, the media likes to sell newspapers right? It’s the headlines that sell newspapers. And so it is often blown out of proportion.*

Similarly, Laura, a Parent Council Member and parent of two students (a grade 11 student at Agrestic High and a grade 12 student at West Beverly High) added that Agrestic High School has

*had a bad rap in the past, and they’ve had some situations in the past that have been in the media ... We had [a] police officer who was down here who ... had a meeting with any parents that were interested, and he just said that [Agrestic High School] will be on the media radar for a while. He told us of a situation that had happened a week prior to all of us coming out [at another high school], and we said, “well no, we didn’t hear about it in the media” and he said, “well of course not. [Agrestic]’s in the media right now, and that’s where the focus is”. But, the situation at this other school was probably just as severe as far as bullying goes and as far as assaulting people and whatnot. So, it happens all around, but the media kind of plays up on [Agrestic] and certain schools.*

Thus, the media's focus on the most extreme acts of violence, and their continued focus on particular schools, serves to perpetuate the image that schools are rife with crime and violence and that particular schools are much more dangerous than others. Based on media reports alone, it would appear as though a culture of fear about school crime and violence does exist; however, examining the information garnered from the Safe Schools Survey and data from interview respondents, it is obvious that this is not the case. Those on the front lines only exhibit low-levels of fear—and in fact, many report feeling no fear at all—even though the media's portrayal is exactly the opposite.

It is not merely the news media that have an influence on our perceptions and fears. Carol, a teacher at Shermer High School, said that she began locking her classroom door after the season six finale of the popular television show “Grey’s Anatomy”, which featured a rampage shooting with multiple victims:

*Carol: Okay, this is going to sound ridiculous, but do you watch Grey’s Anatomy?*

*Interviewer: Yes.*

*Carol: You know the finale?*

*Interviewer: Yes.*

*Carol: Well we do lockdown drills every year ... But after that episode, I like locked my door for the whole day.*

*Interviewer: Really?*

*Carol: Yeah, so while I was in school, when I was teaching, I had my door locked. And I don’t know why, I was watching it, going “jeez, that could happen”. You never know.*

This fictional television show had such an impact on this high school teacher that she began to change her practices to reduce her level of fear and risk. Although that may seem more in line with a fear of crime, as opposed to a culture of fear, it does demonstrate the significant impact that the media can have on individuals, and their resultant actions.

Lawrence and Mueller (2003) stress that sensationalist and distorted media coverage fails to properly inform the public and policy makers about the real threats of bullying, theft and gang violence in schools. This process can have far-reaching repercussions: when there are high levels of media attention toward a particular event, it often becomes the topic of the public agenda (Vasterman 2005). As a result, the media's portrayal of school crime and violence as a growing problem may both influence and legitimize the implementation of anti-violence policies and programs.

### **INSTITUTIONALIZED RESPONSES**

In order for a culture of fear to be present, safety measures must be implemented at all schools, regardless of the school's level of risk. As outlined in Chapter 1, in a short span of time (less than 20 years) the Ontario Ministry of Education has made school safety initiatives one of their policy priorities. And, the majority of these policy changes have come within the last decade. All of these policies are required at all schools within Ontario, regardless of the individual school's propensity for violence. As Carley, a grade 12 student at Liberty High School, said:

*I guess the lockdown is a way that they're making us feel safer, just knowing that there's a system if anything was to happen instead of just huge chaos in the school, people running around with guns and stuff. It's more organized and stuff. But, every school has to do that now. Even the elementary schools have to do that. I don't really... it's hard to say because there's nothing wrong at Liberty High School. There aren't any problems or anything, about feeling unsafe.*

Carley outlines that there is “nothing wrong” at her high school, yet these procedures have been implemented nevertheless. There is often a blanket approach taken by the

school board and, as Carley points out, policies are implemented at all schools regardless of their individual level of violence.

Numerous researchers demonstrate that fear of crime is a significant impetus for the implementation of public policies and procedures (Surette 1998; Zimring 1998; Lawrence and Mueller 2003). Lawrence and Mueller (2003) point out that the Columbine massacre brought about significant public concern about the presence of firearms in schools, and thus put pressure on school administration to create policies and implement screening devices (e.g., metal detectors and security cameras) “to reduce the risk of similar shootings and to convey a sense of safety in schools” (p. 334). Fear is a major impetus for policy implementation.

However, previous research has demonstrated that increased security can have a negative affect on school climate, students’ psychological well-being and feelings of safety. Thompkins (2000) argues that metal detectors, bars on windows and surveillance cameras create a school climate where students are always under surveillance and cannot be trusted (as cited in Herda-Rapp, 2003: 569). In addition, locker searches, mandated school uniforms, metal detectors, and surveillance cameras often resemble a prison instead of a safe, warm and friendly school environment conducive to learning (Herda-Rapp 2003). Although most respondents were able to explain the rationale behind the schools’ safety practices (such as lockdowns), students and teachers alike mentioned that lockdowns actually *added* to their fear and perception of risk, instead of reducing it. For example, as Carley, a grade 10 student at Liberty High School said, “*the only time that I haven’t felt safe was when we started doing the lockdowns, we’d like practice in school*

*and you'd have to hide at the back of the class, and like lock all the school doors. It's pretty intense".* Similar sentiments were expressed by other respondents. Carol, A teacher at Shermer High School, said that during the lockdowns she sits and thinks "*this could really happen. Some of [the students] are really quiet, and they're just kind of staring. I know I do that. I'm always like, 'imagine if this was real'".* In essence, there is a feedback loop: policies and procedures are implemented across the board as a means of protecting students and thereby reducing fear, but they instead make students and teachers acutely aware that an issue could occur at any point, and thus can make them more fearful and increase their perception of risk. Mia, a teacher at Shermer High School, pointed out that

*kids associate [lockdowns] with school shootings, and since school shootings have become more prevalent, lockdown drills have become more prevalent ... But there's still like the fear of god in them a bit. So they still take it seriously, because to them, school shootings are still within their realm of, you know, memory. They know that people were killed.*

It is not only the lockdown drills that have made students and teachers more fearful; the introduction of police into the schools can have a similar effect. As Mark, a teacher at Sunnydale High School, pointed out:

*The ironic – well, not really ironic – thing is that the good students are the ones who will react to the cop with fear and deference, "oooohh, a cop". But they don't have anything to worry about. The kids who are bad have very little fear of the police, because they've already been involved with the police and the legal system, and they recognize that it doesn't matter if a cop takes them in, they're going to get out right away...And it perhaps keeps the bad guys from being present in the school. But, I don't know. He doesn't put the fear of god into the bad kids.*

Just as lockdown drills are intended to provide a sense of organization and preparation in the event an unforeseeable catastrophe, school liaison officers are stationed within the school in order to provide a sense of security for those students who are not misbehaving,



and a sense of fear for those who may choose to misbehave. However, Mark points out that these two changes have actually had the opposite effect.

Lockdown drills have been practiced for a few years in some schools, however they only became mandatory in Ontario in 2010. Similarly, the first set of police officers to be stationed in schools began in the 2008-2009 school year. The recent introduction of these polices and procedures may be one of the reasons why they serve to create fear. For example, fire drills—a practice that occurs world-wide in numerous institutions and organizations, not only on schools—have become routine. The repetitive nature of these drills has led them to become mundane tasks that individuals comply with out of necessity. However, they are not seen as fear-generating events. But, lockdown drills are novel experiences. Over time, procedures such as lockdown drills may become ritualized, as fire drills have, but for the time being they still serve to generate fear instead of quenching it.

Thus, not only is there a feedback loop where these policies and procedures actually make individuals more fearful, but there is also an association of ‘safe school’ policies with extreme acts of violence such as school shootings. In some ways, then, the recent introduction of procedures such as lockdowns actually helps to *create* a culture of fear.

## **CONCLUDING THOUGHTS**

This chapter has provided empirical evidence to test the culture of fear thesis. In doing so, it provides support for hypothesis one: the disjuncture between the perception and prevalence of school crime and violence stems from an overarching fear, which is

pervasive, consistent, decoupled from the ecology of school crime, and largely stems from the mass media. However, it also demonstrates that this fear exists at rather low levels, as the interview respondents, Safe Schools Survey data, and even public opinion polls indicate that most individuals feel safe while they are at school. It also addresses the three sub-hypotheses, demonstrating that: 1) fear, though at very low levels, is pervasive across school jurisdictions (across different schools and different stakeholders in school hierarchies), with little to no variation by actual prevalence of school violence; 2) participants recognize that violence may occur randomly (rather than predictably, as in ecologies of crime) though they do not change their lifestyles to accommodate this fear; and 3) media reports of school crime and violence are highly prevalent and sensationalist, and therefore may be influential in the perception that a culture of fear exists.

Additionally, the media's influential, sensationalist and prevalent articles are presumably one of the major factors influencing the schools to adopt blanket policies and procedures that can, and do, serve to increase individuals' fear.

The following chapter will take an organizational approach, exploring how schools and school boards implement their policies and procedures. Through the use of institutional theory, it will examine the external pressures—some of which stem from this overarching culture of fear—that have forced schools to implement 'safe school' policies and procedures, and the organizational constraints faced by schools in the undertaking of these responsibilities.

## **CHAPTER 6: INSTITUTIONAL THEORY**

Over the past 18 years, the focus on school safety has been front and center of Ontario's school policies. Yet, most of these policies have come only within the past few years, during the time when rates of school crime and violence have been declining. Since risk itself is not rising, and schools are quite safe places for students to be (as demonstrated in Chapter 1), the impetus for policy implementation is being driven by other factors. As determined in Chapter 5, key players within the schools do not express fear for their safety. It therefore appears that schools—and the Ontario Ministry of Education—are responding to external pressures to implement school safety policies and programs, which may stem from the media's representation of school crime and violence (as demonstrated in Chapter 4).

As outlined in Chapter 1, the Ontario Ministry of Education began introducing policies to improve the safety of their schools in 1994, with the *Violence Free Schools Act*. Then, in 2000, the *Provincial Model for a Local Police/School Board Protocol*, *Bill 81: The Safe Schools Act*, and the *Ontario School's Code of Conduct* all came into effect. In 2005, the *Safe School's Action Team* was created. In 2007, *Bill 212: Progressive Discipline and School Safety* replaced *Bill 81: The Safe Schools Act*. In 2008, after the first fatal school shooting in a downtown Toronto school (O'Grady, Parnaby and Schilkschneit 2010), the *Safe School Community Advisory Panel Report* and *The Roots of Youth Violence Report* were both commissioned. Upon recommendation of these reports, 30 armed Police officers were positioned in 30 Toronto schools in the 2008-2009 school year with an additional 20 added in 2010. In 2009, *Bill 157: Keeping Our Kids Safe at*

*School* came into effect. Mandatory lock-down procedures were required for every school in 2010, along with two practice lockdown drills required of every school in Ontario. Finally, in 2011 *Bill 13: Accepting Schools Act* was introduced<sup>22</sup>. See Table 6.1, below, for a complete list of these policies and reports.

**Table 6.1 Ontario Ministry of Education School Safety Policies**

<b>Year</b>	<b>Policy/Report</b>
1994	Violence Free Schools Act
2000	Provincial Model for a Local Police/School Board Protocol Bill 81: The Safe Schools Act Ontario School’s Code of Conduct
2005	Creation of Safe School’s Action Team
2007	Bill 212: Progressive Discipline and School Safety
2008	Safe School Community Advisory Panel Report (aka “The Falconer Report”) The Roots of Youth Violence Report
2008/09	Uniformed and Armed Police Officers in 20 Toronto Schools
2009	Bill 157: Keeping Our Kids Safe at School
2010	Mandatory Lock-Down Procedures and Drills Uniformed and Armed Police Officers in 20 additional Toronto Schools
2011	Bill 13: Accepting Schools Act

In this chapter I utilize institutional theory to explore how the gap between actual rates of school crime and violence and individuals’ perceptions of fear may stem from institutional processes whereby schools seek legitimacy and therefore reflect how centralized hierarchies respond to their institutional environment. In this case, actual fear

<sup>22</sup> *Bill 13: Accepting Schools Act, 2011* was introduced into legislation, and passed the third and final reading on June 5, 2012. It came into effect at the start of the school year in September 2012.

takes a more loosely-coupled form, and can be sensitive to ecological variation. This chapter addresses two main hypotheses:

**H2a:** External, system-wide responses are implemented as a legitimacy seeking function, and are not reflective of patterns of fear.

**H2b:** Actual implementation of external, system-wide responses takes a loosely coupled form.

First, I examine why responses to school violence are implemented, outlining that external pressures from parents and the media often influence policies. I outline how schools attempt to procure legitimacy through both external and internal processes. Although all of the policies outlined in Table 6.1 (above) are enacted in a blanket approach (that is, all schools are required to adopt a particular program or policy, or it is suggested that they implement something to address the purported problem), some schools have enacted measures after specific acts of school crime and violence, and thus are responding to ecological variation. These are external legitimating processes adopted by schools. Next, I focus on the internal processes of procuring legitimacy, by examining both the loosely coupled nature of schooling and ceremonial conformity. I will demonstrate that policies are not applied consistently between or within schools as a result of the loose coupling that exists between classrooms, and also between teachers and outer layers of the organizational model of schooling, which can lead teachers to lose faith in their administration. Next, I examine how schools and teachers often ‘ceremonially’ conform to mandated policies and procedures, leading many programs to be merely ‘tacked on’ to the schools daily functioning. Finally, I examine the unintended consequences of the numerous policies and procedures set forth by the Ministry, school boards, and individual schools, including increased levels of fear, unnecessary

suspensions, and increases in severity as violent activities are pushed off of school property.

## **PROCURING LEGITIMACY**

Legitimacy is the key to an organization's survival. Social institutions maintain their authority and legitimacy through their products, services, policies and programs, some of which are often only 'ceremonially' adopted by the organization (Meyer and Rowan 1977; McMullen 1994). In order to achieve public support and therefore retain legitimacy, institutional organizations must appear to be in accordance with the needs and demands of their external environments. If the organization does not retain a façade of competence and legitimacy, or if it markedly differs from what the popular conception perceives that the organization should look like, the organization could be penalized for violation, and risk organizational death. Schools are able to retain legitimacy for the most part, as Mark (a teacher at Sunnydale High School), notes:

*because this is a legal school, and we are accredited, and we are a valid school that follows the curriculum and allows students to graduate, that we are abiding by basic laws and principals of human society, civilization, that allow their children free and safe access to a public school. We're bound by law. We are bound by law to provide a safe environment for students to learn. So I think that we probably look at it and say well, why do we need to prove that we're providing a safe location for their kids to learn? If we've demonstrated that we're not, or we have shown that things are going to hell in a hand cart, and kids are getting knifed and drugs are being sold and shit like that, so we generally don't have to.*

As Mark's statement demonstrates, legitimacy is a taken-for-granted notion, but it can be challenged by particular events. For example, a school shooting or other severe or high-profile act of violence can challenge the school's legitimacy. Similarly, evaluations or reports—such as the Falconer report, which made sweeping negative statements about

the state of Toronto's schools—can act as a challenge to schools' legitimacy. Thus, schools must engage in legitimacy maintenance. There are both external and internal processes at work when schools attempt to maintain the taken-for-granted notion of legitimacy. External processes of legitimacy maintenance include implementing policies and programs with limited or no evaluation or measurement, and reacting to particular instances of crime or violence as they arise. Internal processes include utilizing a loosely-coupled approach, and engaging in ceremonial conformity. These processes are explored in depth below.

### *External Processes*

#### *Responding to the “problem”*

Muschert and Tagnedda (2011) argue that “the low tolerance for risk in schools drives the development of anti-violence policies in schools” (p. 356). Even though statistical evidence (e.g., Taylor-Butts 2010; see also Chapter 1) demonstrates that actual risk of student victimization at school is quite low, “no risk is tolerable when it comes to children in schools” (Muschert & Peguero, 2010:121). Therefore, when the media disproportionately report on issues of school crime and violence, fueling the image that student risk of victimization is high, schools are pressured to respond by implementing policies that will have the appearance of keeping kids safe. High profile media reports on extreme acts of violence can exacerbate these pressures, leading to the “Columbine Effect,” a term used to underscore the idea that severe acts of school crime and violence—such as the Columbine school shooting—affect how school violence and crime, as well as school security, are thought about (Muschert & Peguero 2010). The idea

of the Columbine Effect is analogous to Jeffrey Alexander's (2003) description of the Holocaust as a universal symbol, or trope, that represents trauma and fear. Alexander (2003) writes that

specific and situated historical event[s] ... become transformed into a generalized symbol of human suffering and moral evil ... This cultural transformation has been achieved because the originating historical event, traumatic in the extreme for a delimited particular groups, has come ... to be redefined as a traumatic event for all of humankind.<sup>23</sup> (P. 28)

Like the Holocaust, the term Columbine has become a trope. Just as Alexander claims that the Holocaust represents trauma of a racial, ethnic, and religious nature, the “Columbine Effect” represents extreme school violence, and the trauma and fear associated with it. Columbine serves as an anchor for readers, providing them with a reference point as they process other information provided to them. For example, as a result of the Columbine shooting and the media's attention to it, concern about firearms in public schools skyrocketed, and school administrators in the United States faced pressures to install structural security measures (such as security cameras, metal detectors, and even X-ray machines) to minimize the risk of future rampage shootings while simultaneously conveying a sense of safety in schools to students, parents, teachers and the public (Lawrence & Mueller, 2003).

One parent, Edward, the father of a student at West Beverly High and one at Agrestic High, noted that Columbine and other high profile incidents have lead to increased school policies and procedures: “*But the lockdowns for violence... it's like these few people, the Columbines and all those things, have forced the whole world to go*

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<sup>23</sup> Alexander (2003) elaborates that the term ‘humankind’ “does not mean that the event is literally experienced or even represented as such by all humankind” (p. 230). Instead, it can mean individuals of any specific geographical-cultural location.



*through all of this trouble and have all of these procedures in place.*” Edward’s statement indicates that many of the policies that are implemented are a result of the “Columbine Effect,” and are not necessarily reflective of the needs of the individual school.

However, some respondents did note that schools have implemented security measures as a result of actual incidents that have occurred on their property (i.e. a response to ecological variation in student violence). For example, Thomas, a student at Breaker High, noted that there had been an increase in violence during the first week of September. He said *“Well, like, the school takes really good precautions, because they have had incidents in the past, but now they have security the first week. Just to keep everything under control, so it’s not a big deal anymore.”* However, these responses are reactions to particular incidents, and not preventative measures. As Kristen, a teacher at Bayside High School, notes:

*I think it takes a bad thing to happen for them to say “okay this is an issue we need to deal with” ... So I think most of it’s reactive, because you don’t really know what you’re dealing with until it happens. Like you can’t invent something that will cover all the bases, so I think generally [the polices are] reactive.*

Similarly, in a discussion about counsellors, social workers, and security cameras that were introduced at Sunnydale High School, Mark, a teacher at Sunnydale, notes that they are *“a reactive measure. It’s a reactive measure because of the need that existed”*. When asked whether it was a reaction to events at Sunnydale High School or to general instances of crime and violence in the area, Mark said *“I think it’s our school. I don’t think that all schools have required this. So I think it’s a specific reaction, but it’s also meant to prevent. It’s also preventative. So, it’s reacting to the problems but we’re also*

*hoping it will solve problems that haven't yet existed*". As Mark notes, some of the structural measures are designed to react to specific incidents, but can also serve to prevent future, similar incidents.

This idea of “reaction as prevention”—a means of legitimacy maintenance—was also demonstrated by the specific reactions to two serious acts of violence that occurred within the school board under examination: in 2005, a group of young men entered Agrestic High School armed with deadly weapons, and attacked one of the school's sports teams during their after-school practice. In 2008, a Bayside High School Student was stabbed on the first day of school (see Chapter 5 for more details, and a discussion of the media's response to these two incidents). As a result of the attack at Agrestic High School, Edward, the parent of a student at Agrestic, noted that the “*there was police presence for the small period of time after the ... incident,*” and that “*one of the backlashes from the incident ... was that they were going to have peripheral doors locked throughout the day*”. Similarly, Kristen, a teacher at Bayside High School, explained that as a result of the stabbing, the school

*had a company come and do a safety audit of the grounds, so I know that they did make some changes, like cutting back the trees to improve visibility, and they moved, you know, those big boulders that were there that kids used to sit on. So they did do that safety audit, and I also know that they've done... they've installed the cameras. They had cameras, but they've installed better cameras.*

These changes are reactionary measures, as their implementation is a direct result of the violent events occurring at these particular schools. However, the intention is simultaneously preventative, as a means of keeping other intruders from entering the school and maintaining the visibility of students in the future. Above all, the result is

legitimacy maintenance. As challenges to the school's legitimacy arises, the school is quick to engage in "reaction as prevention" to placate parents and other members of the institutional environment. These local reactive processes, such as hiring additional personnel, locking doors, or engaging in safety audits and moving "big boulders" (as Kristen explains in the above quote), are means of maintaining legitimacy despite ecological variation in student violence.

Although the above examples are reactions to local school violence, most of the policies are responses to various pressures stemming from the school board, parents and the media. Thus, centralized policies and procedures are also a means of maintaining legitimacy, though at the board or Ministry level, as opposed to at the school level (as a response to ecological variation in student violence would be). Jason, the principal of Agrestic High School, explains that pressures from the school board often dictate how schools operate:

*We're subject to pressures all the time ... We often do things that we may not fundamentally back up. For example, school uniforms are really—a lot of people who talk about school safety talk about that uniforms make it safer. And I'm not sure how true that is - I really don't know ... But it's very tough to get that through with the Board right now, in terms of getting public input, getting everyone on board, making sure parents agree to it. So, you know, there are times when yeah, you get pressure. But you try to do what is good for the students, and not let the media drive things. You try to do what is good; you're the filter sometimes. You have to filter out what pressures are out there to do certain things.*

Jason notes that pressures stem from the board and the media, but that the administrator's position should be that of a "filter" to determine which policies or programs will best meet the needs of the student. However, frequently the principal is not able to act as a "filter" and must instead comply with the directives laid out by the Ministry. As a result,

schools are forced to implement policies and programs that are mandated by the Ontario Ministry of Education.

*Evaluation and monitoring*

Numerous researchers have pointed out that of the abundance of school anti-violence programs, only a handful have been evaluated (for example, see: Lawrence 1998; Adams 2000; Juvonen 2001; McCarter 2010). Additionally, of the few programs that *have* been evaluated, very few are regarded as effective (Juvonen 2001). The lack of data available on the myriad programs available for schools means that they must make decisions about which programs to implement based on factors other than program evaluation. Juvonen (2001) claims schools “are likely to make decisions based on such factors as the program materials and training, cost, ease of implementation, and public relations issues such as how visible a particular tactic might be” (p. 5). The more visible the program’s tactics—such as designing posters, or holding an assembly that can be advertised to parents and the community—the more likely it is to be a ‘tacked on’ program and not fully integrated into the school’s daily functioning; at the same time, the visibility of the program’s tactics provides the school with more legitimacy, as they can clearly claim that they are ‘doing something’ about the purported problem.

In the 2010 Auditor General’s Report, it was noted that neither the Ontario Ministry of Education nor the school boards under examination by the Auditor General had collected information to determine whether programs were having any bearing on students’ behaviours, and that “without such information it is difficult to determine whether the millions of dollars being spent are reducing physical and psychological

aggression in our schools” (McCarter 2010:273). Further, the Auditor General’s report indicates that “Ministry policies require that school boards establish performance indicators to monitor, review, and evaluate the effectiveness of school safety policies and programs” (McCarter 2010:283), however the majority of schools and boards were merely utilizing “anecdotal feedback and informal review of suspension statistics” (McCarter 2010:283). Suspension and expulsion rates are often used to measure the extent of school violence (Adams 2000). An increase in suspension or expulsion rates are viewed as an increase in school crime and violence, while a decrease in suspension or expulsion rates are viewed as either a general decline in school crime and violence, or demonstration of the effectiveness of a program aimed at crime or violence reduction. However, suspension and expulsion rates only measures the disciplinary outcome; it does not explore *why* the students were suspended or expelled (e.g., violence, crime, or other issues such as persistent truancy), nor does it account for the reasons that these behaviours occurred in the first place (e.g., the social or cultural conditions of the school or community that lead to the situation resulting in suspension or expulsion). Suspension and expulsion rates also change depending on the guiding policy. As demonstrated in Chapter 1, expulsion rates drastically increased after the increase of *Bill 81: Safe Schools Act*, and have been declining since the introduction of *Bill 212: Progressive Discipline and School Safety*. More importantly, suspension and expulsion rates only reflect those students that were actually *caught* for various infractions. Suspension and expulsion rates serve as good measures of students that have been caught, defined as violent, and officially processed (or ‘policed’) by the system, but they are *not* valid indicators of the

extent of school violence. In fact, although the Ministry of Education records the number of suspensions and expulsions, “it does not do so according to the specific type of inappropriate behaviour ... Thus, the ability to analyze this information in a meaningful way is limited” (McCarter 2010:281). However, when the public hears of decreasing suspensions or expulsions, they often associate this with program effectiveness and increased safety.

Similarly, anecdotal feedback is frequently used as a method of program evaluation; in essence, if individuals are happy, the program is often deemed to be effective. For example, in an article from the Globe Campus, a section of The Globe and Mail online, a school board member was quoted discussing the implementation of armed police officers in Toronto high schools, and reported that “we have lots of anecdotal stuff that suggests things are going well and that the kids like the officers, and on that basis alone it’s been successful” (Appleby 2009). The same article begins by claiming that “At the 22 Toronto District School Board schools with a full-time police presence, attendance is up and criminal charges down. Anecdotally, a similar picture emerges at the eight Catholic schools taking part”. The Auditor General’s 2010 report builds on this, claiming that during their evaluation administrators spoke highly of school-based officers, and thus program expansion should be considered (McCarter 2010:274). Yet, the only evaluation of the implementation of police officers into Toronto schools was a survey that conducted by the local police service. The conclusions of the survey demonstrated that “improvements were not noted in all areas of school safety”, however “improved parental perception of school safety ... and improvements in student perceptions of the police”

were noted (McCarter 2010:279). Thus, even though there was a demonstrated lack of actual safety improvements to the school, the anecdotal evidence and parental/student satisfaction are taken as measurements of program effectiveness, and thus as demonstrations of legitimacy.

### ***Internal Processes***

In order to retain legitimacy and public support, organizations must prove to their institutional environment that they are acting, or responding to a problem, in an appropriate manner and for a collectively valued purpose. For example, schools will institute policies and programs against violence, and even if these policies and programs are not extensively integrated into their daily practices, their reported implementation serves to placate members of the institutional environment. Loose coupling and ceremonial conformity are two internal processes of maintaining legitimacy and public support.

#### ***Loose coupling***

Traditional schools in Canada and the United States—including all public and Catholic schools in this sample—are loosely coupled organizations. In a loosely coupled system, each part, including the classrooms and the administration, is a semiautonomous unit. Therefore, occurrences in one classroom have limited impact on the occurrences in other classrooms. However, in an organization or system that is tightly coupled, such as a factory, each section or grouping is highly dependent on other sections or groups, and the occurrences in one group greatly impact occurrences in other sections. In a tightly coupled system, units are “integrated components of a single entity” (Labaree 2010:123);

as such, they are closely monitored and ‘feedback loops’ are built in to the system’s very function. Within schools, each classroom functions independently of the other classrooms, and is housed and facilitated as a separate, self-contained unit. The fully-integrated components of a tightly coupled system means that there is often close monitoring and evaluation of each component, and that compliance to policies and procedures must occur in one unit in order to maintain working order in other units. However, in a loosely coupled system, evaluation and monitoring are often minimal, and compliance often occurs only ceremonially, whereby the appearance of fulfillment is present but only in a ritualistic or superficial manner. Loosely coupled systems are able to function without evaluation and with ceremonial compliance because of their very nature as a cluster of functioning semi-autonomous units. Meyer and Rowan (1977) point out that loosely- or de-coupled approaches are rationally functional for many institutions and organizations, as “inconsistencies and anomalies involved in technical activities” are buffered from the formal structure, which “enables organizations to maintain standardized, legitimating, formal structures while their activities vary in response to practical considerations” (p. 357). More tightly coupled approaches, however, including “inspection and evaluation can uncover events and deviations that undermine legitimacy” (Meyer and Rowan 1977:357). Table 6.2, below, compares loosely and tightly coupled systems.



**Table 6.2 Loosely and Tightly Coupled Systems, Compared**

<b>Loosely Coupled Systems</b>	<b>Tightly Coupled Systems</b>
Autonomous or semi-autonomous units	Fully integrated components/units
Self-contained consequences	Feedback loops / far-reaching consequences
Ceremonial compliance	Tight integration
Minimal or no evaluation or monitoring	Close evaluation and monitoring

However, the loosely-coupled nature of the school means that policies and programs are not applied consistently within or between schools. In fact, administrators, teachers, parents and students alike commented on this. Students indicated that teachers are not uniformly compliant with behavioural rules and regulations for students. As Thomas, a student at Breaker High, notes: *“there are some teachers that are really strict, and they hold really good order, but there’s other teachers ... [that are] total pushover[s]”*. This was also identified by Carol, a teacher at Shermer High School, as being *“kind of crappy actually. It would work better if everyone enforced the same thing. Some teachers are really, really super lax, and others are ridiculous”*. Carol’s statement that *“it would work better”* indicates that the differential enforcement of school regulations is not working to reduce disruptive behaviour in schools, which is the sole purpose of these safe school policies.

The fact that some teachers will discipline students for inappropriate behaviour and others will not was also noted by Jennifer, a teacher at Agrestic High. As Jennifer notes, the students recognize that teachers are not uniformly compliant:

*there are teachers that will open up the doors and will stand there, and we’ll see things and we’ll act. But some teachers won’t. Like, “that’s not my job, that’s admin’s [job]”. But the kids kind of know that. So, they might pull something with one teacher but they won’t pull it with another. Like, I won’t have that problem in my class because they know I’ll be all*

*over them. Whereas another teacher, they know what they can get away with.*

Jennifer elaborated that the administration have pushed for consistency among “*so the kids get the right message*” that their disruptive or unruly behaviour is never acceptable. Kristen, a teacher at Bayside High School, explained that this lack of consistency could actually lead to escalations in student disruptions. She said that “*the kid knows, ‘oh, I can get away with throwing pencils and erasers? Well tomorrow I’m going to shove his chair out of the way, and I know that’s okay as long as I don’t hit him, then I know I’m not going to the office*”. As Kristen noted, as long as there is no physical violence (hitting), students may not be sent to the office. Thus, the loosely coupled nature of schools means that many behaviours are addressed inconsistently, and that some behaviours will not be dealt with unless they are severe.

As demonstrated in the above examples, teachers are provided discretion as a function of their position as what Lipsky (1980) calls “street-level bureaucrats”. These are “public service workers whose clients are nonvoluntary, who function under conditions of crushing demand and inadequate resources, where goals are ambiguous or conflicted and where performance in relation to goals is hard to measure” (Labaree 2010:134). Teachers become the personification of school policies, just as the police personify the law, but discretion is necessary to allow them to manage the unpredictable circumstances that arise in their jobs as public service workers. Since teachers are on the “front-lines” and are in the eyes of the public (especially with regard to parents), they must make decisions that uphold their personal teaching expertise and style and thus are often resistant to adhere to reform changes (Labaree 2010). These discretionary decisions can, however, lead to

inconsistencies between classrooms, which, as the above examples demonstrate, can cause further problems for the prevention of school disruptions.

Inconsistencies resulting from teachers' discretion are not only present with regard to behavioural concerns, but also with the teacher's adherence to formally mandated policies. Many of the policies meted out by the Ontario Ministry of Education are formalized and routinized, mandated to occur within every classroom and every school in Ontario. For example, according to the *Provincial Model for a Local Police/School Board Protocol, 2011*, there are two mandatory requirements of Ontario schools: first, "all publicly funded school boards in Ontario must establish a lockdown policy to ensure the development and implementation of individual school plans," and second "a minimum of two lockdown drills must occur each school year" (Queen's Printer 2011:22). Thus, teachers are required to practice lockdown procedures when the school has lockdown drills. However, many students reported that their teachers only ceremonially complied with these requirements. For instance, students described teachers telling them to sit quietly at their desks and read, allowing students to chat quietly with one another while they sat on the floor, or continuing to undertake their schoolwork during the drill. These allowances are all in direct violation of the lockdown procedures which indicate that students should remain silent, and should congregate on the floor, away from windows and doors and not remain at their desks (Queen's Printer 2011).

Additionally, Elizabeth, a student at Agrestic High, explained that her teacher:

*decided that she wasn't going to do the lockdown once because she was in the middle of class. I think it was right before the end of the semester, and she really wanted her kids to finish whatever it was, and so she didn't do it, and she just didn't do anything. She kept the door wide open, and other*

*teachers come down the hall to make sure that everyone's doing what they're supposed to be doing – and yeah, you're supposed to close and lock the door and put paper on the windows if the door has them – but yeah, people were like 'what are you doing? You're supposed to be in a lockdown'.*

Elizabeth elaborated that because her teacher knew that it was only a drill and not an actual incident, she decided to continue with the lesson instead of adhering to the policy. Yet, because of a lack of policy program evaluation, and because of the insular and autonomous nature of the classroom, teachers that do not uphold school policies are often not reprimanded. The loosely coupled nature of the school, along with the teacher's discretion within the classroom, means that policies such as this will not be implemented uniformly or consistently within or between schools.

Loose coupling was also noted to occur with the schools' administration. Teachers claimed that the administration did not always back up the teachers when they attempted to discipline students by sending them to the office. Teachers felt that their hands were tied as the administrators would coddle the students instead of punishing them, or that the blanket policies, such as *Bill 212: Progressive Discipline and School Safety*, were not allowing the administration to follow through with punishments. For example, Carol, a teacher at Shermer High School, said that

*there's a lot of teachers at our school that think that the Vice Principals are a joke and that they don't follow up, but everything I've ever done, they've followed up with no problem. But I hear teachers say things like 'every time I send a student to the Vice Principal, they get a candy', or they get a warning you know, like it's kind of a joke. So they don't think it was properly dealt with.*

Lesley, a teacher at Sweet Valley High, added that

*there is a climate among most teachers that feels that the administration is ineffective and that they're not doing what they're supposed to ... a lot of them say that our VPs [Vice Principals] give them a lollipop and pat them on the back and send them on their merry way. Like, that's the general feeling, it's like they're going to day care or something.*

Similarly, Lilly, also a teacher at Sweet Valley High, said that

*Lilly: I don't necessarily like how it's being taken care of. For example, the Vice Principal is usually the one who's dealing with them, right? And they have a lovely checklist, well if it's your first offence then it's a warning. If it's your second offence... I think that they stick to this way too much.*

**Interviewer:** *Progressive discipline?*

*Lilly: Yes, and I have a problem with this. When a kid's screwed up, he's screwed up. Get him out of here. We have too much tolerance for assholes. And, if a teacher – if I'm at the point when I'm bringing a kid to you, well I've already been through the checklist. Believe me, and don't send him back to my class saying "well he's been warned". Kids aren't afraid of the office anymore at all. I had a girl come back, she had dropped out again, and she dragged her butt back to school after a few months. She came in with her tail between her legs and looked at me, and I said, "and what do you want from me?". She said, "Miss, just so you know before you start at me, I was terrified to see you. I don't care about the VPs, but you terrify me". And I'm like, well yeah that's great – but there's no fear at all. The kids know that if they go to the office they get a candy, because it's on all of their desks.*

Carol, Lesley and Lilly demonstrate that even when teachers follow through with discipline, the administration often do not. By giving the students a warning or a candy and sending them back to the classroom without a punishment for their actions, the teacher's initial disciplinary attempts are undermined. This further exacerbates the situation, as the lack of consistency is no longer merely among teachers, but also between teachers and administrators. Kyle, a teacher at Bayside High School said that

*Well, we have a zero-tolerance policy on fighting, which means that, technically... now the problem is, a lot of times, it doesn't go – they [the administration] don't go through with it. That doesn't mean – I mean, if you get in a fight, you get suspended, period. But there are instances*

*where there's things where students should be suspended and then there's no consequences to it, and I think that tends to be the biggest problem with schools because the kids aren't dumb. They're not stupid. They know. They realize that, oh, I can be late ten times and they say that you're supposed to get suspended for being late, but nothing happens; well, I guess I can be late all the time. Right, and then that snowball effect happens. And that happens with violence as well to a certain extent that, you know, whether its verbal violence or physical violence, that sometimes a kid talks his way out of something and when he should be suspended, and in our red book – we get a red book with you know the rules and that kind of stuff of the school – and you think that, and it says you know, zero-tolerance on this and that, and that, but then sometimes administration doesn't necessarily follow those guidelines.*

Kyle notes that the problem is exacerbated by the lack of consistency, calling it a “*snowball effect*”. Since programs and policies are not applied consistently as a result of loose coupling, they are likely not as effective as they would be if they were uniformly applied and thoroughly integrated within the school. In fact, many respondents note that programs are not fully integrated into the schools daily functioning because they are not part of the curriculum. Similarly, Milne (2011) demonstrates that many of the educators she interviewed in an Ontario school board had not heard of progressive discipline policies, despite the fact that they came into effect in 2007 under *Bill 212: Progressive Discipline and School Safety*. A lack of knowledge of Ministry policies at the educator level corresponds with Labaree’s (2010) claims that “school reform efforts are hard-pressed to penetrate vertically all the way down through these layers in the system, and to spread horizontally across all the segments in each layer, to reach – at long last – the classroom and the student” (p. 124). Instead, at the top layers of the hierarchy, such as the Ontario Ministry of Education, consistent and uniform policy is created. At the bottom layers of the hierarchy (the teachers and front-line workers), there is much discretion

regarding the actual implementation of the policies within each classroom. At the school level, which is the middle of the hierarchy, adoption and implementation of the policies are variable and often ceremonial. In other words, many of the policies that are put forth by the Ontario Ministry of Education appear to only be complied with superficially or occasionally at the school level. Thus, it is not just the loosely coupled nature of schools that leads to a lack of uniform implementation, but also that programs are “tacked on,” and only complied with ceremonially. This is where I will now turn.

### ***Ceremonial compliance***

Although school policies are centralized and mandated by the school board or Ontario Ministry of Education, the extent to which the policies are upheld and the programs are integrated is ultimately up to the administration and the teachers within the particular school. As noted above, teachers can be considered “street-level bureaucrats” (Lipsky 1980), and thus they retain discretion, even though they are tasked with applying rules. As a result, many educators only ceremonially comply with the policies and programs, for example by holding assemblies or putting up posters. In essence, these programs are ‘tacked on’, and not fully integrated into the schools daily functioning. Similarly, although some respondents indicated that anti-violence concerns were talked about during a class, most indicated that “*anything that’s really happened in class has been because bullying has been happening in the class*”, as Veronica, a student at Bellaire Academy, noted. As Mark, a teacher at Sunnydale High School, explained, teacher’s discretion plays a large role in whether anti-violence concerns are discussed during class time. He said that “*there’s nothing that I know of hardwired into the curriculum that*

*propels it. The teacher would have to decide on his or her own whether they were going to do that*". As a result, it seems that many teachers choose to only comply with the programs ceremonially, or superficially. Similarly, when schools do utilize anti-violence programs or hold assemblies about violence-related concerns, it is often up to the teacher's discretion whether they address it within the classroom. As noted by Carol, a teacher at Shermer High School, teachers

*get a handout that says this speaker is coming and this is what they're going to talk about and here's some discussion questions if you want. That doesn't always come, it depends on the speaker. Sometimes they've prepared something. And it's totally voluntary whether [the teachers] talk about it or not. Some teachers are going to be, "well, you took up all of my class time, so I'm not wasting any more time on it"*.

Therefore, many of the programs are not fully integrated into the school's daily functioning; instead, they are merely 'tacked on' to the existing curriculum or programming. A fully integrated program would mean that teachers were incorporating the ideas and concepts from the program within their other instructional topics (e.g. math, English, science) and throughout the activities in school day (e.g., class time, recess, lunch break). When programs are tacked on, they are only the focus of attention for a prescribed amount of time, such as the duration of an assembly. By tacking on programs, schools are able to claim that they are complying with the policies mandated by the Ministry; as long as the programs are in existence, or are present at the school, they are not questioned or evaluated on their degree of integration or usefulness. Remarkably, the 2010 Auditor General's Report notes that "We were informed that neither the Ministry nor the school boards we visited have established a formal monitoring function to ensure compliance with school safety requirements" (McCarter 2010:280). Thus, the loosely



coupled nature of schools allowed for ceremonial compliance from educators without any evaluation or monitoring, and therefore without any repercussions from the Board or Ministry level.

Many schools choose “edutainment” to get their anti-violence message across, where the school holds an assembly about a social problem such as bullying and simultaneously entertains the children while educating them on the issue at hand. However, as one-time events, the message is frequently lost on students and teachers alike. For example, Veronica, a student at Bellaire Academy, said

*They have assemblies, but they're kind of lame. Like, this one I remember distinctly, they had these people dressed up as Natives, and it was called Sticks and Stones, and they basically just hung around and had fake smoke going off. It was just horrible, like it didn't send off a message – people just sat there and laughed. And like teachers were laughing and were like “can we just leave right now?”*

The direction that the school receives from the Board of Education impacts how the teachers and administrators respond to the request for a new program initiative. As Carol, a teacher at Shermer High School, explains, “*A lot of these things come from the board too, you know, “this is the focus of the year”, and then the Vice Principal and student council will be told to organize something or have a speaker*”. Thus, the Board of Education is responding to pressures from either the public or the Ministry of Education, and the schools are told “*the focus of the year*”, instead of being provided with the resources and training to effectively implement a program. This is often met with ceremonial compliance at various levels within the school’s bureaucratic hierarchy. When ceremonial compliance occurs within an organization, it can lead to cynicism among the individuals within the organization (Meyer et al. 1997; Boxenbaum and Jonsson 2008;

MacLean and Behnam 2010). When Mark, a teacher at Sunnydale High School, was asked if students have participated in a school program dealing with the reduction of violence, or any anti-bullying type programs, he replied “*there are other big measures that the Board wants to do. They’re into character building*” indicating that the Board’s focus had shifted. However, Mark elaborated on his statement, calling character building “*bullshit. Absolutely unadulterated bullshit*” because

*it was a lot of show and blow by what’s-his-face [the Board’s director] ... because there was nothing of substance to that. He had a lot of photo ops, some slight changes to the website, the front page of the website. But, there was very little way- he felt that he could somehow externalize the change, and change people’s character, and hold teachers responsible and accountable for the character of the student. Which was, for me, laughable.*

The website changes he speaks of provide a strong analogy for understanding how these programs are tacked on and only complied with ceremonially: Mark outlines that there were only minimal changes to the website, and only to the front page. This is analogous to holding a school assembly or putting up posters about a purported social problem, as the changes (the assembly or posters) are only minimal, yet, to use Mark’s words, they “*externalize the change*”, providing the image that change is actually occurring. Although loose coupling and ceremonial conformity go hand-in-hand, Boxenbaum and Jonsson (2008) argue that ceremonial conformity—especially when it stems from those with more formal authority or power, such as the Board’s director—can lead individuals, over time, to “*refuse to see themselves simply as ceremonial props*” (p. 88). Further, MacLean and Behnam (2010) build on this, arguing that these individuals may not only react cynically,

as Mark does, but “their reaction may not be to lessen the gap between substance and symbolism, but instead to exploit the gap” (MacLean and Behnam 2010:1516).

The frustration Mark exhibited in the above statement was illustrative of many teacher’s frustrations with the Board’s changing foci, and served as part of the reason that they would only ‘tack on’ the programs instead of fully integrating them into their classrooms. For example, Lilly, a teacher at Sweet Valley High, said that *“it’s hard not to have the initial response of “oh my god, something else we have to do”. You know what I mean? Sometimes it just feels like they are implementing stuff without any real thought”*. In fact, Juvonen (2001) claims that in the United States, “there are over 200 institutional programs alone” (p. 2). Although some of these programs are structural (such as the use of security cameras or metal detectors), the majority of these programs are social in nature, focussing on social skills, problem solving, and community development. Schools are often seen as the ideal vessel for addressing social problem education (Davies and Guppy 2010; Labaree 2010); however, “teachers have reported much stress when they must ‘cram’ this social problems curriculum alongside the basics” (Davies & Guppy 2010:234). As a result, social problems curricula are often relegated to the periphery, only complied with ceremonially, and often merely ‘tacked on’ to the already overfilled curriculum. Lilly went on to say that there are just too many programs and policies being presented that the teacher’s enthusiasm is drained, and teachers resort to either not implementing the program at all, or merely tacking it on in addition to what they are already doing. She said *“the problem is, it’s the boy who cried wolf. They keep saying “well we have this, we have this, we have this”, but oh my god, another one? You know*

*what I mean? So they've almost exhausted our enthusiasm for a program*". Thus, the sheer volume of requirements and programming presented by the school board and other high-level administration can lead teachers to engage in ceremonial compliance as a last resort.

Similarly, in discussions about Restorative Justice, a program recently introduced by the Board, Lilly said "*it just sounds like another catch phrase from the Board of Education. And there's already so many*". Kyle, a teacher at Bayside High School, said

*teachers are stubborn people: OK I'll try it, and at the end of the semester they're going "this sucks, it's wasting my time, I don't need to do this crap" you know and that's partly why it didn't work. And kids just aren't willing to open up as much as I think the Ministry would think. You know you're sitting up at legislation going "oh no, the kids will come up and tell you." No, they won't. They don't.*

Kyle and Lilly's statements demonstrate the cynicism that was discussed previously.

Additionally, it demonstrates the loose- or de-coupling that exists between those at the top of the hierarchy (policy makers) and those at the bottom (teachers). Teachers' frustrations about the sheer number of programs and that the programs come to them from the top down (e.g., they are not created by those within the school) leads them to not fully integrate the programs into the daily functioning of the classroom. Instead, they are merely tacked on, or complied with only ceremonially.

Ceremonial compliance can be seen as a means of retaining legitimacy. The school adheres to the policies set forth by the Ministry of Education—if only superficially—but even *ceremonial* conformity allows them to placate parents, the media and any other concerned individuals by assuring them that "something is being done" about the purported problem. However, the addition of policies and programs – whether

they are fully integrated or merely tacked on – can have problems of their own; it is to these unintended consequences that I will now turn.

### *Unintended consequences*

As demonstrated in Chapter 5, the introduction of security devices or policies designed to make students feel safer while they are in school can actually have the opposite effect; that is, these structural or cultural changes can have the unintended consequences of making students feel that their school environment is unsafe. As Muschert and Peguero (2010) note, “policy makers tend to search for a “silver bullet” solution, one that will solve problems without causing unintended consequences (Marx, 1995)” (p. 119). However, sociologists have pointed out that there are almost always unintended consequences when social policies are implemented, and that the “grave irony comes when those policies intended to ameliorate the problem are themselves the cause of an increase in the violence or fear they are entrusted to control (Marx, 1981)” (Muschert & Peguero, 2010:119). In Chapter 5, it was demonstrated that policies enacted to keep students safe, such as lockdowns, can actually help facilitate a culture of fear. However, there are additional unintended consequences of the policies and procedures enacted by the Ontario Ministry of Education.

The first unintended consequence that was outlined by the interview respondents is that having police in schools (often in the form of School Resource Officers) does not create a sense of calm in the students, but instead worries those students who tend not to have any behavioural issues. The students who for the most part would not have any negative contact with the police are thus fearful when they are present in the school, and

the students who do have contact with the police tend to be deferential to their presence. Mark, a teacher at Sunnydale High School, explained that students react to police with fear when they are not used to being in contact with them (Mark identified these as “*the good students*”), but the students that have had experience and contact with the police are indifferent toward their presence. Thus, police presence in schools does not have a calming effect, but instead conveys a feeling of uncertainty, danger, and potentially fear. In fact, Juvonen (2001) outlines that “uniformed officers can, in fact, breed a sense of mistrust among students and hence adversely affect school climate” (p. 3). Furthermore, many types of structural responses (such as security guards, locker searches and metal detectors) have been demonstrated to predict increases in school disorder (Hyman and Perone 1998; Mayer and Leone 1999; Juvonen 2001).

The second unintended consequence that was outlined by the interview respondents is in regard to school uniforms. Some schools have implemented uniforms to provide consistency: if all students are wearing the same thing, they can easily spot an intruder (as they would not be wearing the uniform); they can reduce gang colours from being worn within schools; and they can reduce the theft of expensive clothing items or bullying that stems from an individual’s attire. However, it was noted by the parent of a student at Eastland High School that the uniform policy was being upheld too strictly, to the point where her “*daughter actually got suspended once for wearing an undershirt. Because, we’re very picky about gang stuff at our school, and she was wearing a coloured undershirt because her [uniform] shirt was so thin, and because [the undershirt] was a colour she got suspended ...*” Thus, a student who was conforming to

the uniform policy and who was not affiliated with a gang was penalized as a result of the school's policy. On a related note the opposite can happen as well, when students who are involved in gangs misappropriate the school's uniforms. Josh, a student at Bayside High School, said that gang members that attend Bayside High School "*always wear red uniforms, just because they think they're in the bloods*". Thus, gang members are able to still signal their membership through their uniform, even though one of the purposes of having uniforms is to reduce the display of gang colours.

The third unintended consequence that was outlined by the interview respondents is that policy responses, such as cameras on school property, so called "zero tolerance" approaches, and police presence on school property has not actually quenched school crime and violence, but instead has pushed it off of school property. This is ironic in that the majority of school crime and violence occurs off of school property to begin with (see Chapter 1). Numerous respondents from a variety of schools discussed that when fights do occur, they overwhelmingly occur off of school property. Various locations were noted by many respondents, including "Liquidation World" (an outlet store that sells overstock merchandise), "the community centre", "behind the portables" and other off-site locations such as local malls and parks. Thomas, a student at Breaker High, stated, "*they're all off school property, like way out there. Like they're not even close to the school at all, because if they do get caught they're in a lot of trouble for violence on school property and everything*". However, it is also problematic in that crime and violence occurring off of school property is often out of the view of adults who could quickly or easily intervene (e.g., teachers, administrators). Therefore, the consequences of

the actions could be more severe than if they had taken place on school property where they could have been dealt with quickly.

Unintended consequences of school policies can lead to increased fear in the case of having police in schools, unnecessary suspensions for students believed to be not upholding the uniform policy, and increased violence as a result of fighting being pushed off of school property. Thus, these “silver bullet” programs (Marx, 1995) can actually exacerbate the fear or violence they were originally intended to quench. Additionally, the lack of evaluation and measurement of these programs means that these programs and policies are unlikely to be modified.

## **CONCLUDING THOUGHTS**

In this chapter I demonstrated that responses to school violence and crime often stem from external pressures from parents and the media, though occasionally they are enacted as a response to ecological variation of student violence, in that schools will sometimes enact measures after a particular act of school crime or violence. Additionally, in this chapter I demonstrated that the loosely coupled nature of schooling has implications for consistency within and between classrooms and schools. I also explored how schools engage in ceremonial conformity, ‘tacking on’ programs as opposed to fully integrating them within the daily functioning of the school. Because of their very nature as a cluster of functioning semi-autonomous units, loosely coupled systems are able to function with minimal evaluation and monitoring, which allows them to partake in ceremonial compliance while maintaining their legitimacy. In terms of school safety policies and programs, schools tend to not undertake evaluation at all, to use suspension



rates to measure the success of an anti-violence programs or policies, or to utilize anecdotal feedback as a measure of program efficacy. Finally, I examined the unintended consequences of these “silver bullet” policies, demonstrating that although they are intended to improve the schools safety, they can actually cause escalations in violence and increases in fear.

This chapter is not intended to serve as a criticism of loose coupling and ceremonial compliance. Despite the fact that schools often engage in ceremonial conformity, and despite the loosely coupled nature in which policies and programs are implemented, these policies certainly accomplish one major goal: protection and retention of schools’ legitimacy. Schools are able to maintain the trust and commitment of their constituents when anomalous but high profile events of crime or violence occur. The school may be criticized for allowing the incident to occur in the first place, however they are seen to be “doing something about the problem” by responding with various policies and procedures. These responses serve to placate the critics. Most of the policies that have been implemented by the Ontario Ministry of Education have been accepted and praised by the public and the media; in fact, the only policy that the Ontario Ministry of Education received criticism for was *Bill 81: Safe Schools Act*, which was criticized for removing too much discretion from local actors and for being too exacting – in other words, it was criticized for being too tightly coupled (see Chapter 1 for a further explanation of the resultant criticisms and repercussions). Therefore, it appears that schools need to find a balance, responding to situations as they occur—often engaging in “reaction as prevention,” as discussed earlier in this chapter—yet simultaneously ensuring

that the responses and preventative actions are not too tightly coupled in order to avoid criticisms such as those that stemmed from *Bill 81*. As demonstrated, loosely coupled approaches and ceremonial policies appear to be the most conducive for achieving this balance.

## **CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION**<sup>24</sup>

In this dissertation I have demonstrated that there are many cultural and organizational factors at play that can account for the disjuncture between the perception of, response to, and actual prevalence of school crime and violence. In this chapter I succinctly summarize the key findings that were outlined in the preceding chapters, and provides some conclusions to the research questions and hypotheses posed initially in Chapter One. Then, I address the contributions this dissertation makes to the broader sociological literature, which is followed by a discussion of the limitations, and finally, suggestions for future research.

### **ANSWERING RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND ADDRESSING HYPOTHESES**

This project was based on one overarching research question: What accounts for the gaps between perceptions, system responses, and actual prevalence of school crime

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<sup>24</sup> At the time of writing this conclusion, three mass public shootings have occurred. On June 2nd, 2012, a gunman opened fire in the food court of the Eaton Centre, a shopping mall in downtown Toronto, killing two and wounding six others. On July 16th, shots rang out at a block party in Toronto, killing two and leaving 23 injured. And, on July 20th, a gunman opened fire on a movie theatre in Colorado, fatally wounding two and injuring 59 others. In the days and weeks following these public shootings, processes similar to those discussed in this dissertation unfolded. The media reported on the shootings as being random events, claiming that there is a crisis of violence abounding, and highlighting that individuals risk danger whether they are in their neighborhood or at a public venue such as a shopping mall or movie theatre. Links were made within the media between the movie theatre shooting and the shooting at Columbine High School. Officials from city and provincial and federal levels spoke out—including U.S. President Obama, who spoke to the public after the movie theatre massacre—seemingly as a result of massive pressures to respond to this purported crisis of violence. At the same time, individuals from these areas spoke out about their relative safety, claiming that they are not fearful to return; for example, the father of a victim wounded in the July 16th shooting said “the week’s events do not make [me] concerned about [my] children visiting the area [where the shooting occurred]” (Mills & Robinson, 2012). Although the processes are similar, the institutional environments differ greatly, which indicates that policy responses will likely differ greatly. When events occur in a school setting, system-wide policies are enacted (as was demonstrated in earlier chapters). However, that type of response is virtually impossible with regard to public events of violence. Yet, debates regarding social policy, the implementation of structural security measures, and increasing funding for all types of social programs and policies are at the foreground. The processes explicated within this dissertation are obviously not relegated solely to the issue of school crime and violence, but apply to many forms of public and high profile events of crime and violence.

and violence? In order to answer that question, three additional research questions and their corresponding hypotheses were posed. Below is a summary of each research question, corresponding hypothesis, and provisional answers.

Research question 1a asked: Is school violence feared equally among all key players within the school system, regardless of their position within the school (e.g., student, teacher, administrator) or the school they attend? Namely, is fear influenced by ecological variation of crime and violence? Chapter 5 demonstrated that interview respondents, Safe Schools Survey data, and even public opinion polls indicate that most individuals feel safe while they are at school, and thus fear exists only at very low levels; although participants acknowledge that violence may occur randomly—rather than predictably, as in ecologies of crime—they do not change their lifestyles to accommodate this fear. Question 1c asked: Do media reports accurately reflect the amount of school crime and violence that is occurring, or do the media disproportionately report on the most heinous acts of school violence (such as school shootings)? Chapter 4 demonstrated that the media focus on the most rare events of school crime and violence—namely, school shootings—and then when other events are reported, they are often linked to high profile events such as Columbine. Thus, there is partial support for the Culture of Fear Hypothesis, which states: the disjuncture stems from an overarching fear, which is pervasive, consistent, decoupled from the ecology of school crime, and largely stems from the mass media. There is also partial support for the three sub-hypotheses:

**H1a:** Fear should be pervasive across school jurisdictions (across different schools and different stakeholders in school hierarchies), with little ecological variation by actual prevalence of school violence.

**H1b:** Participants should fear that violence will occur randomly, rather than predictably, as in ecologies of crime.

**H1c:** Media reports of school crime should be highly prevalent and sensationalist.

With regard to H1a, there was consistency among members of different schools and individuals of different positions (for example, teachers, students and principals). They did not express fear, but instead shared a general perception of risk. They acknowledged that acts of school crime and violence could occur and that they are often unpredictable (thus, indicating a general perception of risk), but the respondents did not demonstrate an outright fear, as they overwhelmingly expressed that they felt safe being at school. And, consistent with H1b, most respondents expressed concern about random events of crime and violence indicating that they recognize a potential for random victimization, but due to the low probability of these actions occurring, they do not necessarily fear it. Finally, consistent with H1c, Chapter 4 demonstrated that the media focus on events that are highly prevalent and sensationalist, such as school shootings, which are events that rarely occur within a school community. Chapter 4 demonstrated that the media's disproportionate and exaggerated focus on the most severe instances of school crime and violence may be one of the key factors influencing schools to adopt system-wide policies and procedures, but any public fear that is generated by the media seems to exist only at relatively low levels, be rather quite short-lived, and parallel the media's reporting on high-profile and newsworthy events.

Research question 1b asked: Are responses to school crime and violence implemented consistently across all schools, regardless of the school's individual risk for crime and violence (that is, regardless of ecological variation), and if so, why? It was

demonstrated in Chapter 1 and Chapter 6 that the Ontario Ministry of Education creates system-wide policies and procedures that are to be enacted by all schools and all teachers within their jurisdiction. However, often these system-wide responses are a response to external pressures or media responses of high profile events, and not to specific incidents occurring within particular schools. Thus, schools that have not had specific incidents must still work within a particular policy, which can then exacerbate the students' fear and/or risk perception. As such, there is support for the institutional theory hypothesis that the gap stems from institutional processes whereby schools seek legitimacy and therefore reflect how centralized hierarchies respond to their institutional environment. As schools respond to external pressures they are attempting to retain their legitimacy and the faith and confidence of their constituents. Therefore, the school board is ensuring legitimacy for all schools within their purview by creating system-wide and uniform policies, not merely attending to schools experiencing high rates of criminal or violent activity. As these policies are implemented, they initially generate a low level of fear as they serve as a reminder that dangers can occur on school property. For example, as demonstrated in Chapter 5 and Chapter 6, increased security can have a negative affect on school climate, students' psychological well-being, and feelings of safety. Although their initial implementation can generate this increased tension, over time these policies become routinized—much like fire drills—and the fear dissipates. This supports sub-hypothesis H2a, that external, system-wide responses are implemented as a legitimacy seeking function, and are not reflective of patterns of fear. Additionally, it was demonstrated that the external, system-wide responses are loosely coupled in their actual

implementation. On the ground level, the implementation of these system-wide policies is not consistent within schools nor within classrooms, which can serve to buffer students from potentially harmful and fear-generating effects of these policies. Therefore, sub-hypothesis H2b, that actual implementation of external, system wide responses takes a loosely coupled form, is also supported.

Finally, Confirmatory Bias was demonstrated to serve as the mechanisms that perpetuate these cycles. The Confirmatory Bias hypothesis states that: scattered and sporadic events of school violence receive large-scale exposure, often through the media, through confirmatory bias processes. These mechanisms are able to not only generate and perpetuate a culture of fear, but can also serve to legitimate school policies as it is easier to confirm perceptions of risk than to disconfirm them. Chapter 4 demonstrates that the media disproportionately focus on extreme acts of school crime and violence and highlight the random nature of these events, creating the impression that they can happen anywhere, at anytime, to anyone. Similarly, the media focus on particular schools—those that are often assumed to be more dangerous—developing the idea that these schools have an elevated level of risk compared to other schools. As demonstrated in Chapter 6, when acts of crime and violence are “anchored” by school shootings, such as with the “Columbine Effect,” the media plays into the random nature of school crime and violence creating the impression that—as many newspaper articles stated—school crime and violence can happen at any time, anywhere, to anyone. Interview respondents recognized that there is an element of randomness to these events, like other dangerous events (such as car accidents or earthquakes), but they overwhelmingly conveyed that there is a low

probability of actual danger and thus did not exhibit fear for their own personal victimization. Even though policy makers seem to latch on to the concept of randomness by implementing system-wide responses, those on the front lines do not. Confirmatory Bias processes can also account for school policy justifications, as a lack of crime and/or violence after the implementation of a policy is seen as confirmation of that policy's utility.

In sum, culturally there is an overarching perception that students could be at risk while they are at school, even though statistical evidence demonstrates that most schools are actually quite safe places to be. But, schools cannot merely rely on statistical evidence; they must claim that they are actively engaging in protecting their students. They must retain their legitimacy and demonstrate to parents and the public that students are safe, and they do this by implementing policies and procedures. Although there are negative repercussions to some of these policies, and they are maintained long after the public's calls to "do something" about the problem of school violence, schools have buffering processes built into their very organization that allow them to maintain their daily goals of instruction, though not necessarily or fully integrating potentially ineffectual policies. As a result, the loosely coupled approach that schools take to implementing Board- and Ministry-mandated policies can actually be quite beneficial.

#### **CONTRIBUTIONS TO EXISTING RESEARCH**

This research contributes to the current literature in three unique ways. First, by focusing on the gap between falling prevalence of school crime and violence and rising school responses to the problem, it provides further understanding of the complexities



associated with issues of school safety. Second, this project operationalizes and empirically tests the culture of fear thesis, which has not before been operationalized or empirically tested. Third, this dissertation utilizes institutional theory in a new way, by applying it to issues of school safety. Although institutional theory has been used to explore school responses to societal issues including social problems curricula, it has not been utilized specifically to explore responses to school crime and violence. As many empirical studies that utilize institutional theory are quantitative, this project's mixed-methods approach also utilizes the theory in a unique way.

Additionally, this research contributes to three main bodies of literature: 1) the sociology of education and policy literature; 2) methodological literature, and 3) theory-based literature. First, this project transcends a more rational approach to policy implementation; rationally speaking, schools should react to problems particular to their individual schools by implementing individual responses specific to those problems. Instead, this dissertation demonstrated that when responses to school crime and violence are implemented en masse, through governmentally mandated programs and policies, these policies take a loosely coupled response and not a rational response to ecological prevalence. Whereas control or reproduction theories would argue that school policies are a rational response to danger or fear, this project demonstrates that fear is actually quite low and therefore actual implementation is loosely coupled. This research highlights and addresses a key paradox in schools, examining the significant gap that exists between the prevalence of school crime and violence, and the school's reactions and interventions.

Additionally, this project highlights that school policies, often implemented as a result of public pressures, can increase individual anxieties and perception of risk.

Second, the mixed-methods approach to this research provides a holistic and thorough test of the culture of fear, which advances both the methodological and the theoretical literature. Mixed-methods approaches are relatively rare, yet strong arguments exist for the use of triangulation. The combination of media reports, rich qualitative data, and descriptive statistics simultaneously overcomes the limitations and utilizes the strengths of each method. This study demonstrates how the combination of methods provides for a greater understanding of the research topic, research subjects, and theory. To only examine one ‘piece of the puzzle’, whether it be media reports, qualitative interviews, or examination of existing descriptive statistics, would not allow for a complete understanding of the cultural, social, and organizational processes that are simultaneously at play.

Additionally, existing studies of the culture of fear primarily are theoretical, and rarely are empirical. For example, the founding fathers of the culture of fear (Glassner and Furedi) report primarily anecdotal evidence to demonstrate their theory; they do not set out to empirically test their claims. Of the few studies that attempt to empirically determine whether or not a culture of fear exists, they focus on only one aspect of the culture of fear, such as an examination of media reports, or use interviews as their only means of evidence. Although there are explicit accounts of the means of creating a culture of fear, to date no existing study attempts to analytically examine all of these means simultaneously. As Lindqvist and Nordanger (2007) say, “there is immediate need for

descriptive studies where the focus is empirical” (p. 24), which this project accomplishes. Thus, it is an important contribution to various bodies of sociological literature.

## **LIMITATIONS**

This dissertation takes a uniquely holistic approach, asking several different research questions to explore issues pertaining to each of the interconnected theoretical approaches. Different levels of analysis and methodological approaches were used in order to provide a complete and thorough understanding of the problem. However, no project is without its limitations.

First, as this dissertation itself has demonstrated, confirmatory biases are quite prevalent and often the individual is unaware and unintentional in their bias (Nickerson 1998). Thus, my own personal biases may have factored into the analysis and resultant findings. Personally, I never felt unsafe while I was in high school. When the Columbine school shooting occurred in 1999, I was in grade 12 at a large suburban high school. But, I did not feel any less safe at school after that tragic event. With the increased media attention toward school crime and violence in the years following, I began to wonder what—if anything—had changed, and whether my own experiences in high school were significantly different from students attending school now, or if schools are actually less safe than they had been years earlier. My personal experiences and feelings of safety may have been the impetus for studying the phenomenon of school crime and violence, and may have inadvertently led me to believe that school violence and crime is not as prevalent as it is often claimed to be. However, I have taken great care to be objective at

all stages in this dissertation, and I have taken precautions to ensure that the impact of any limitations is minimal.

Second, sampling limitations (which are outlined thoroughly in Chapter Three) exist which stem from the use of convenience or snowball sampling, and the necessary reliance on school Principals to coordinate sampling within two of the schools. However, this project had a large sample size, with 66 personal interviews representing over half of the schools in the particular school board under study, and I used supplementary information such as the Safe Schools Survey, which reinforced the interview findings. Triangulating the methodology and the data sources, as encouraged by Ragin (1987; 1999), reveals the substantively and theoretically meaningful details that would be lacking otherwise. Ragin (1994) claimed that the use of triangulation for this type of research ensures that “there is a reciprocal clarification of the underlying character of the phenomena under investigation and the theoretical concepts that they are believed to exemplify” (p. 103).

Third, only two newspapers were used in the media content analysis. Although care was taken to utilize a Canadian national newspaper (the Globe and Mail) and a newspaper local to the school board under study, the low number of newspapers represented may be seen as a limitation. It must be noted, however, that over 20 years of newspaper articles were analyzed, resulting in the content analysis of 2647 newspaper articles.

Finally, even though the interviews represent a broad selection of students, teachers, administrators, parents and a police officer, these individuals may not be representative of all members of their particular role groups. For example, it is possible that the students interviewed did not represent the most fearful students, in particular those that choose not

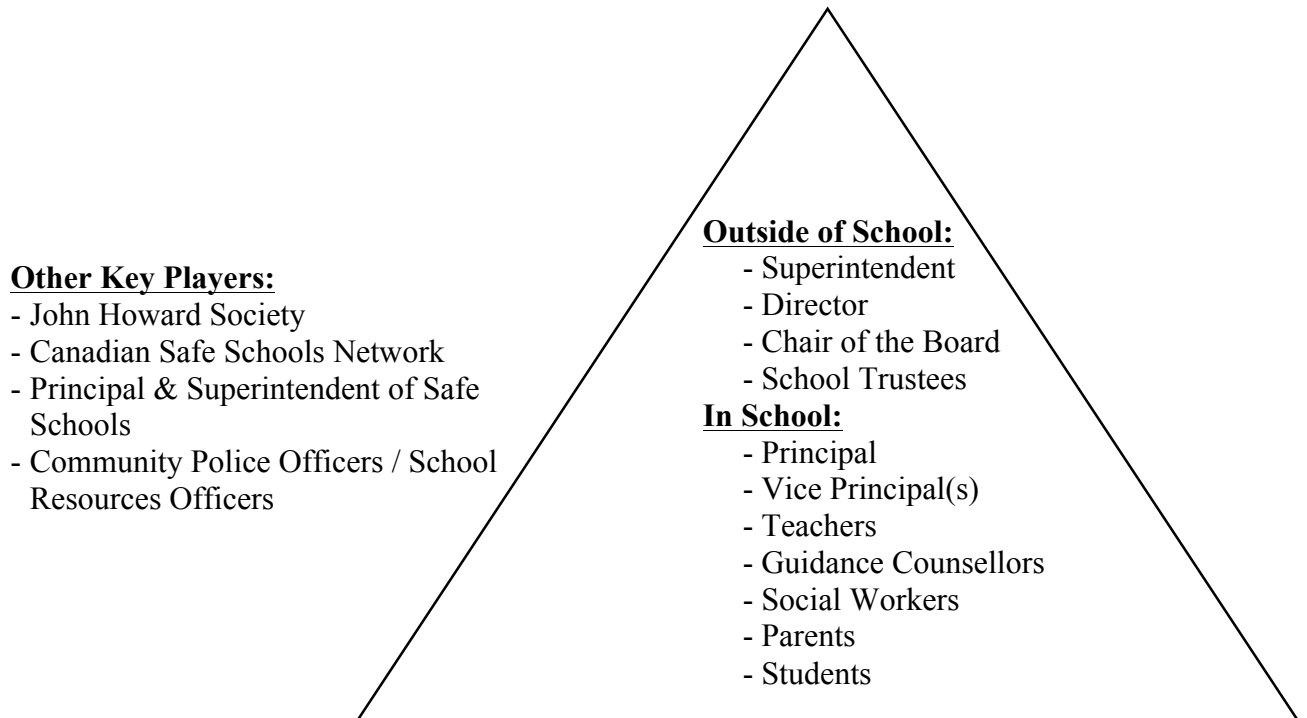
to come to school as a result of their extreme fear. Similarly, as some entire families were interviewed—which is an asset, as I was able to verify that parents’ and children’s recollections were congruent—it must be noted that families are social networks, with similar experiences and opinions. As many respondents came from the same social networks, pockets of individuals with different experiences and perceptions may not be represented here. Additionally, there is a lack of high-level administrators represented. For example, trustees, the chair of the school board, and other members of the board of education are not represented in these data. Their participation would not only ensure that every level of school administration was represented, but it would also allow for further understanding of how system-wide policies are created and disseminated. This concept will be explored further below, as it is a key area for future research.

## **FUTURE RESEARCH**

Future research should extend this project by ensuring that all hierarchical levels in the school system are represented. At the bottom level, this would consist of those within the school: teachers, students, social workers, guidance counselors, principals, vice principals and parents. At the upper level, this would consist of those in charge of system-wide policy creation, such as the school trustees, chair of the board, director and superintendent. At the outer level, interviews should take place with those agencies and individuals that are closely connected to all levels of the school hierarchy, including community police officers and school resource officers, the principal and superintendent of safe schools, members of the Canadian Safe Schools Network, and members of organizations like the John Howard Society. This would allow for a greater understanding

of how—and why—school policies are created at the very top levels. It will allow for an examination of how external pressures from the public and the media influence policy makers. It will also allow for additional testing of the Institutional Theory hypotheses; namely, that many system-wide policies are created and implemented as a legitimacy-seeking endeavor. Figure 7.1 is a diagram that depicts the interviews to take place at each level within the hierarchy.

**Figure 7.1 Hierarchical Overview of Interviews**



Additionally, research indicates that policies and programs are more effective when those on the ground level (namely, students) are involved in the creation and implementation (Solomon and Down 2006; Cunningham et al. 2011). Participation in the creation of policy development provides a sense of ownership and therefore can encourage students' commitment to the program, and possibly encourage tighter coupling

with policies that are effective on the ground level. Interviewing those at the top levels of the schools hierarchy can also allow for an exploration of ‘sensemaking’ (Weick and Sutcliffe 2005) at various levels of the hierarchy from the administration all the way down to the students, which could elucidate how and why policies are created, disseminated and implemented, as well as provide insight for the creation of effective policies that are successful at all levels within the hierarchy.

### **FINAL THOUGHTS**

This project was not an attempt to create policies for schools, or even recommend how to make schools safer. Instead, it was an attempt to understand why there are gaps between perception, responses, and prevalence. Although the evidence demonstrates that most schools are quite safe places for students to be, and that the interview respondents overwhelmingly indicated that they felt safe at school, school crime and violence is a problem for some individuals. Students, teachers, and administrators should always feel comfortable going to school. And, no student should ever have to encounter an extreme act of school violence, such as a school shooting. But safe school policies are not a sure-fire way of making schools safer. Policies that are imposed from the top down have their own dynamics, and can create additional challenges for schools to work through. The organizational reality is that it is difficult for schools to produce effective policy that actually create a substantial change, but it is easy to create policies that retain legitimacy.

It appears that, for the most part, schools are doing a good job protecting their students and staff, regardless of the policies that are in place. Any time that large groups

of individuals are together for extended periods of time, conflict is bound to occur. Occasionally, this conflict may escalate into an extreme event. But this does not mean that schools should be feared. Most of the time, schools—like other social institutions—will be safe. However, as demonstrated in this dissertation, policy creation does not seem to follow this type of logic. As Jason, the principal of Agrestic High School, states:

*Schools generally are the safest place – they tell me, you know they're the safest place to be, other than being at home. And in many cases, there are homes here in the [Agrestic High School] community, and when you get into some of these lower income areas, where the housing complexes aren't safer. And that, when you have one thousand kids in any building... I mean, you've got future doctors and lawyers, but also future criminals ... There's going to be conflict. It's part of being a high school. Safety's not a guarantee. All we can do is try to make it as safe as possible.*



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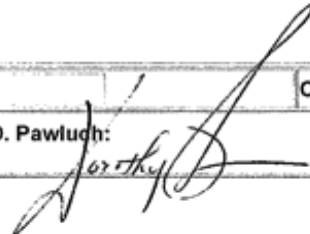
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**APPENDIX A. McMaster Research Ethics Board Approval Form**

McMaster Research Ethics Board

<b>McMaster University Research Ethics Board (MREB)</b> <small>c/o Office of Research Services, MREB Secretariat, GH-305/H, e-mail: ethicsoffice@mcmaster.ca</small> <b>CERTIFICATE OF ETHICS CLEARANCE TO INVOLVE HUMAN PARTICIPANTS IN RESEARCH</b>			
<b>Application Status:</b> New <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Addendum <input type="checkbox"/> Renewal <input type="checkbox"/> Project Number <input type="text" value="2009 058"/>			
<b>TITLE OF RESEARCH PROJECT:</b> In Search of a Culture of Fear: School Shootings and Perceptions of School Violence			
<b>Faculty Investigator (s)/ Supervisor(s)</b>	<b>Dept./Address</b>	<b>Phone</b>	<b>E-Mail</b>
S. Davies	Sociology	23607	daviesrs@mcmaster.ca
<b>Student Investigator(s)</b>	<b>Dept./Address</b>	<b>Phone</b>	<b>E-Mail</b>
S. Howells	Sociology	905-628-2710	howelsa@mcmaster.ca
The application in support of the above research project has been reviewed by the MREB to ensure compliance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement and the McMaster University Policies and Guidelines for Research Involving Human Participants. The following ethics certification is provided by the MREB:			
<input type="checkbox"/> The application protocol is approved as presented without questions or requests for modification. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> The application protocol is approved as revised without questions or requests for modification. <input type="checkbox"/> The application protocol is approved subject to clarification and/or modification as appended or identified below:			
<b>COMMENTS AND CONDITIONS:</b> Ongoing approval is contingent on completing the annual completed/status report. A "Change Request" or amendment must be made and approved before any alterations are made to the research.			
Reporting Frequency: <input type="text"/> Annual: <input type="text"/> Other: <input type="text"/>			
Date: <i>June 11/09</i> Co-Chairs, Dr. D. Maurer, Dr. D. Pawluch: Acting Vice-Chair, Dr. R. Storey:			





## **APPENDIX B. Information Letter**

McMASTER UNIVERSITY  
Department of Sociology  
1280 Main Street West, Hamilton, Ontario, Canada L8S 4M4  
Telephone: (905) 525-9140 Ext. 24481  
E-mail address: [sociology@mcmaster.ca](mailto:sociology@mcmaster.ca)

### **Information Letter:**

#### **A Research Project Examining School Safety and Perceptions of Fear**

##### **Investigator:**

Stephanie Howells  
(MA, Ph.D. Candidate)  
Department of Sociology  
Hamilton, Ontario, Canada  
(905) 628-2710  
[howelsa@mcmaster.ca](mailto:howelsa@mcmaster.ca)

##### **Supervisor:**

Dr. Scott Davies (Ph.D.)  
Department of Sociology  
Hamilton, Ontario, Canada  
(905) 525-9140 ext. 23607  
[daviesrs@mcmaster.ca](mailto:daviesrs@mcmaster.ca)

##### ***Purpose of the Study***

As a graduate student at McMaster University, I am writing my Ph.D. Dissertation on feelings of school safety, and how fearful people are about school crime and violence. School violence is a topic that is receiving much attention, and it is important to discuss feelings of school safety with people involved directly with schools. I want to hear about your perceptions of school crime and violence.

##### ***Procedures of the Study***

The research for this project will be conducted through individual interviews lasting approximately 45 minutes, with individuals directly involved with the school system, such as students, parents/guardians, teachers, principals and vice principals, police officers, and other individuals who work with schools. Basically, I am looking to find out what people's feelings are about school safety, school crime and school violence. With your permission, I would like to tape-record the interviews, so that I can take notes at a later time, which will make our conversation run much more smoothly. Any information will only be used to help me with the research project, and all information will be kept secure and confidential.

##### ***Potential Risks***

The interview does not need to be recorded if it makes you feel uncomfortable. If you give permission to be tape recorded, but change your mind, the tape recorder can be turned off at any time. If any questions make you feel uncomfortable, you can skip them and still remain in the study.

##### ***Potential Benefits***

This research may allow sociologists to better understand how people feel about school safety. It may also allow educators create policies and programs that will keep everyone safe. However, there will be no benefits to you directly.

##### ***Confidentiality***

All of the information that I gain will be kept confidential, and no names or descriptions of any sort will be used in my findings. Any information I gain will be used only for the purpose of writing my dissertation. I will keep all of the tape-recorded interviews, and any notes, secure and away from everyone other than my supervisor (Scott Davies) and myself. In my report, I will not identify any particular school, area, or individual. Privacy will be respected, and I will make every effort to maintain confidentiality. In rare instances, I may have to reveal certain personal information if the law requires it (for example, if someone discloses an incident of child abuse, or a situation where a child is in danger). If this should occur, only the information directly related to the child's risk will be revealed, but the rest will remain private.

***Participation***

It is up to you whether or not you participate in this study. If you do not want to participate, I will not contact you again. If you are willing to be interviewed, please contact me by phone or email (listed at the top of this letter), and we can set up an interview at a time and location that is convenient for you. If at any point you change your mind about your participation, you can contact either myself or Scott Davies to let us know, and your request will be granted immediately. If you choose to withdraw from this study, any information you provided will be destroyed immediately, unless you indicate otherwise.

***Information About Study Results***

The research and final report should be completed by August of 2011. If you are interested in reading the report, or a summary of the most interesting and important findings, you can tell me how you would like it sent to you once the study is complete.

***Information About Participating***

If at any point you have questions, please do not hesitate to contact Stephanie Howells or Scott Davies at the contact information above.

*This study has been reviewed and approved by the McMaster University Research Ethics Board. If you have concerns or questions about your rights as a participant or about the way the study is conducted, you may contact: McMaster Research Ethics Board Secretariat at 905-525-9140, ext. 23142 or email [ethicsoffice@mcmaster.ca](mailto:ethicsoffice@mcmaster.ca)*

**If you are willing to participate in the research by arranging an interview, please contact Stephanie Howells at [howelsa@mcmaster.ca](mailto:howelsa@mcmaster.ca) or 905-628-2710.**

Sincerely,

---

Stephanie Howells, MA  
Department of Sociology  
McMaster University

**APPENDIX C. Interview Consent Form**



McMASTER UNIVERSITY  
Department of Sociology  
1280 Main Street West, Hamilton, Ontario, Canada L8S 4M4  
Telephone: (905) 525-9140 Ext. 24481  
E-mail address: sociology@mcmaster.ca

**Interview Consent Form:**  
**A Research Project Examining School Safety and Perceptions of Fear**

**Investigator:**

Stephanie Howells  
(MA, Ph.D. Candidate)  
Department of Sociology  
Hamilton, Ontario, Canada  
(905) 628-2710  
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**Supervisor:**

Dr. Scott Davies (Ph.D.)  
Department of Sociology  
Hamilton, Ontario, Canada  
(905) 525-9140 ext. 23607  
[daviesrs@mcmaster.ca](mailto:daviesrs@mcmaster.ca)

I have read and understand the letter of information about the research on this project and have had all of my questions answered adequately. I understand that I have the right to refuse to answer any question, and to end the interview at any time without penalty. By signing this form, I give my permission to be interviewed by Stephanie Howells.

I give my permission to have this interview tape recorded:

- Yes.
- No.

Name (please print): \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date of Interview: \_\_\_\_\_

Location of Interview: \_\_\_\_\_

**APPENDIX D. Student Oral Consent Form**



McMASTER UNIVERSITY  
Department of Sociology  
1280 Main Street West, Hamilton, Ontario, Canada L8S 4M4  
Telephone: (905) 525-9140 Ext. 24481  
E-mail address: sociology@mcmaster.ca

**Student Oral Consent for Interview Participation:  
A Research Project Examining School Safety and Perceptions of Fear**

With your permission, I would like to ask you a series of questions regarding your thoughts on school safety, crime, and violence. Anything that you tell me will be kept confidential. Your name will not appear on any forms, and you will not be identified to any other students or teachers. No one at your school will know if you participate, or what you say. We also won't tell your parents. The only exception is if you or someone else is in danger, then I will have to report it to either the school or the police. You have the right to not participate in this interview, to skip any question, and to end the interview at any time, and to participate in the interview without it being tape recorded. Your decisions on these matters will not affect your grades or other school outcomes in any way.

Do you understand the information I have told you about this research?

- Yes.
- No.

Do you have any questions? (*If yes, please ask now*).

- Yes.
- No.

Do you agree to be interviewed by Stephanie Howells?

- Yes.
- No.

Do you agree to be have this interview tape recorded?

- Yes.
- No.

Date of Interview: \_\_\_\_\_

Location of Interview: \_\_\_\_\_

**APPENDIX E. Interview Schedules**

**INTERVIEWS WITH ADMINISTRATORS**

1. How long have you been in this position?
2. How long have you worked at *school name*?
3. Do you generally feel safe at work?
4. Has this changed at all in recent years?
5. Are there ever times that you don't feel safe?
6. What makes you feel safe at work? *Or* What makes you feel unsafe at work?
7. Are there places in or around the school that you wouldn't go?
8. Are there places in or around the school that students are advised not to go?
9. Do you feel safer while you're at work, or outside of work?
10. Do you think most teachers at *school name* feel safe at work?
11. Do you think most students at *school name* feel safe at school?
12. Are there problems with student discipline at *school name*? Explain.
13. What would you do if you were verbally or physically challenged by a student at school?

*Probe:* Do you ever worry that this could happen?

14. What do you tell the teachers to do if they are verbally or physically challenged by a student at school?

*Probe:* Do you ever worry that this could happen?

15. What is your school doing to make students and teachers feel safe?

*Probe:* Has the school made any safety-related changes in recent years?

*Probe:* How do the teachers feel about these changes?



*Probe:* How do the students feel about these changes?

16. Have you noticed any changes due to these programs?

17. Does the school have any physical security measures in place, such as hall monitors, security cameras or metal detectors?

*Probe:* Do they have any influence on where you would or wouldn't go?

*Probe:* Have they changed where students spend their time?

18. Are these practices more proactive or reactive?

*Probe:* Are they in response to actual incidents that have occurred at school name, or to general perceptions of school crime and violence?

19. Are there any measures that the school is planning on implementing that you don't have already?

20. What do you see as your role in addressing school problems?

*Probe:* What do you think the administrations' role is in reducing school crime or violence?

*Probe:* What do you think the teachers' role is in reducing school crime or violence?

*Probe:* What do you think the parents' role is in reducing school crime or violence?

*Probe:* What do you think the students' role is in reducing school crime or violence?

21. In what ways are the school's safety practices demonstrated to students?

22. In what ways are the school's safety practices demonstrated to parents?

*Probe:* How does the school work with parents in regard to school safety?

23. Have the students ever participated in a program at school that talks about how to reduce school crime or violence (such as an anti-bullying program)?

*Probe:* Have the teachers participated in a program?

*Probe:* Have you participated in a program?

24. What is the school's relationship with police services? Example: Is there a school resource officer for your school?

*Probe:* How do school resource officers work within the schools?

*Probe:* What are the perceptions of school resource officers from students?

*Probe:* What are the perceptions of school resource officers from teachers?

25. Are student information and records shared between the police and the school/board?

26. Have you ever witnessed a violent incident at school?

*Probe:* Can you tell me what happened?

*Probe:* Can you tell me how it was dealt with?

27. How do you think that stakeholders like the public, politicians and the media represent issues of school violence?

*Probe:* Do you think that they represent the issues accurately?

28. What responsibilities do you feel towards these types of stakeholders?

*Probe:* Do you think there is pressure to respond in ways that please them?

29. Would you react to the issues differently if it weren't for media or political attention?

*Probe:* What do you think is the best way to deal with issues of school crime and violence?

30. Are there any issues we didn't cover?

## INTERVIEWS WITH TEACHERS

1. How long have you been a teacher?
2. How long have you taught at *school name*?
3. What grade/courses do you teach?
4. Do you generally feel safe at work?

*Probe:* Do you think most teachers at *school name* feel safe at work?

5. Has that changed in recent years?
6. Are there ever times that you don't feel safe?
7. What makes you feel safe at work? *or* What makes you feel unsafe at work?
8. Are there places in or around the school that you wouldn't go?
9. Are there places in or around the school that students are advised not to go?
10. Do you feel safer while you're at work, or outside of work?
11. Do you think the students feel safe at school?
12. In TV and movies, we often see groups at school, like the "nerds" or "jocks". Are there groups like that at your school?

*Probe:* What are the names of these groups?

*Probe:* Which groups are more popular than others?

13. Are there problems with student discipline at *school name*? Explain.
14. What would you do if you were verbally or physically challenged by a student at school?

*Probe:* Do you ever worry that this could happen?

15. What is your school doing to make students and teachers feel safe?

*Probe:* Has the school made any safety-related changes in recent years that you know of?

*Probe:* How do the teachers feel about these changes?

*Probe:* How do the students feel about these changes?

16. Does the school have any physical security measures in place, such as hall monitors, security cameras or metal detectors?

*Probe:* Do they have any influence on where you would or wouldn't go?

*Probe:* Have they changed where students spend their time?

17. Are these practices more proactive or reactive?

*Probe:* Are they in response to actual incidents that have occurred at school name, or to general perceptions of school crime and violence?

18. Are there any measures that the school is planning on implementing that you don't have already?

19. What do you see as your role in addressing school problems?

*Probe:* What do you think the teachers' role is in reducing school crime or violence?

20. In what ways are the school's safety practices demonstrated to students?

21. In what ways are the school's safety practices demonstrated to parents?

22. Have the students ever participated in a program at school that talks about how to reduce school crime or violence (such as an anti-bullying program)?

*Probe:* Have you participated in a program for teachers?

23. Do any of the courses at school discuss school safety or violence issues?

24. What is the school's relationship with police services? Example: Is there a school resource officer for your school?

*Probe:* How do school resource officers work within the schools?

*Probe:* What are the teachers' perceptions of the school resource officer?

25. Have you ever witnessed a violent incident at school? Or, have you heard about a violent incident at school?

*Probe:* Can you tell me what happened?

*Probe:* Can you tell me how it was dealt with?

26. Are there any issues that we didn't cover?

## INTERVIEWS WITH PARENTS

1. What grade is your child in?
2. How many years have they been at *school name*?
3. Does your child generally feel safe at school?

*Probe:* Do you think most children at *school name* feel safe at school?

4. Do you feel safe sending your child to school?
5. Has that changed in recent years?
6. What makes you feel safe sending your child to school? *or* What makes you feel unsafe sending your child to school?
7. Are there any places at or around the school that you won't let your child go, or that you've advised them not to go?
8. Do you feel that your child is safer when they're in school, or outside of school?
9. Are there problems with student discipline at your child's school? Explain.
10. What would your child do if they were verbally or physically threatened or challenged by another student in school?

*Probe:* What would you advise them to do?

*Probe:* Do you ever worry that this could happen?

11. If your child was challenged, threatened or disrespected by another student, is it important for them to stand up and defend themselves?
12. What if the same event happened off school property? Would they deal with it the same way?

*Probe:* Would you advise them to deal with it the same way?

13. What is the school doing to make students feel safe?

*Probe:* Has the school made any safety-related changes in recent years that you know of?

*Probe:* How do you feel about these changes?

14. Does the school have any physical security measures in place, such as hall monitors, security cameras or metal detectors?

*Probe:* Do they have any influence on your feelings of your child's school safety?

*Probe:* Do they have any influence on your child's feelings of school safety?

15. Are there any measures that the school is planning on implementing that they don't have already?

16. What do you see as your role in addressing school problems?

*Probe:* What do you think the parents' role is in reducing school crime or violence?

17. To the best of your knowledge, has your child ever participated in a program at school that talks about how to reduce school crime or violence (such as an anti-bullying program)?

*Probe:* Have you participated in a program for parents?

18. To the best of your knowledge, do any of your child's courses discuss school safety or violence issues?

19. Does your child's school have any relationship with the police? Example: Is there a school resource officer working at your child's school?

*If so:* What is your relationship with, or perception of, the school resource officer?

20. Have you or your child ever witnessed a violent incident at school? Or, have you heard about a violent incident at your child's school?

*Probe:* Can you tell me what happened?

*Probe:* Can you tell me how it was dealt with?

21. Do you talk to your kids about how to handle issues of school crime and/or violence?

*Probe:* How do you tell them to handle it?

22. Are there any important issues that we didn't cover?

## INTERVIEWS WITH STUDENTS

1. What grade are you in?
2. How many years have you been at *school name*?
3. Do you generally feel safe at school?
4. Do you think most students at *school name* feel safe at school?
5. Has that changed in recent years?
6. Are there ever times that you don't feel safe?
7. What makes you feel safe at school? *or* What makes you feel unsafe at school?
8. Are there places in or around the school that you wouldn't go?
9. Do you feel safer while you're in school, or outside of school?
10. Are there areas near the school, or in the neighbourhood, where kids hang out during lunch or free time?

*Probe:* What about after school and on the weekends?

*Probe:* Are these areas dangerous for some students?

11. In TV and movies, we often see groups at school, like the “nerds” or “jocks”. Are there groups like that at your school?
12. What are the names of these groups?
13. Which groups are more popular than others?
14. Are there problems of student discipline at your school? Explain.
15. What would you do if you were verbally or physically threatened or challenged by another student in school?

*Probe:* Do you ever worry that this could happen?

16. If you were challenged, threatened or disrespected by another student, is it important to stand up and defend yourself?



17. What if the same event happened off school property? Would you deal with it in the same way?

18. What is your school doing to make students feel safe?

*Probe:* Has the school made any safety-related changes in recent years that you know of?

*Probe:* How do the students feel about these changes?

19. Does the school have any physical security measures in place, such as hall monitors, security cameras or metal detectors?

20. Do the security cameras / hall monitors at school have any influence on where you would or wouldn't go?

21. What do you see as your role in addressing school problems?

*Probe:* What do you think the students' role is in reducing school crime or violence?

22. Have you ever participated in a program at school that talks about how to reduce school crime or violence (such as an anti-bullying program)?

*If so:* Can you tell me about the program?

23. Do any of your courses discuss school safety or violence issues?

24. Does your school have any relationship with the police? Example: Is there a school resource officer for your school?

*If so:* What are the student's perceptions of the school resource officer?

25. Have you ever witnessed a violent incident at school? Or, have you heard about a violent incident at school?

*Probe:* Can you tell me what happened?

*Probe:* Can you tell me how it was dealt with?

26. Do you talk to your parents about these sorts of things?

*Probe:* How do they tell you to handle it?

27. Are there any important issues that we didn't cover?