

TOP STORY ■■■

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Schools, colleges underreport crime

By John Gramlich, Stateline.org Staff Writer

Schools and colleges across the country do not report crime and violent incidents on campus consistently or accurately — in many cases because they are not required to, according to safety experts and a new report by 27 state attorneys general.

A patchwork of state and federal laws intended to tally assaults, robberies, drug use and other crime at primary and secondary schools — as well as colleges and universities — fails to provide a clear picture of the scope of the problem, critics charge. Out-of-date, incomplete statistics are common and authorities have few effective tools to penalize institutions that do not comply, including fines that observers say amount to a “drop in the bucket.”

Making matters worse, school and college officials are reluctant to release more comprehensive information on their own because of stigmas that can be attached to institutions with frequent occurrences of crime, said Ronald Stephens, executive director of the California-based [National School Safety Center](#), which advocates for safer primary and secondary schools.

Stephens and others stressed that high crime rates do not necessarily reflect administrative failures, and that the absence of accurate information hinders efforts to understand and prevent illegal activity.

“Good crime data can provide a summary of what crimes are occurring, where they are happening and when they are happening,” Stephens said in an e-mail to *Stateline.org*. “When this information is available, school officials can develop more effective prevention and remediation programs and provide responsible adult supervision to those areas where the difficulties are occurring.”

While some advocates for school and college safety have called attention to the underreporting of crime on campus in the past, a [report issued Sept. 6](#) by a bipartisan task force of state attorneys general — convened in the aftermath of the Virginia Tech massacre — gives new weight to the school safety experts’ concerns.

Chaired by Colorado Attorney General John Suthers (R) and Rhode Island Attorney General Patrick Lynch (D), the National Association of Attorneys General Task Force on School and Campus Safety found that current crime reporting “is inconsistent and inaccurate and does not promote true accountability on the part of schools and colleges in terms of dealing with public safety issues.” The attorneys general recommended changes in state and federal policy to address the lack of better information.

“Both the federal government and the states should have crime and violence reporting requirements for schools and colleges that promote accuracy, full disclosure and accountability,” the attorneys general said in the report, the first issued by the task force since 1999, when two students at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colo., shot and killed 12 of their peers and a teacher before killing themselves.

The federal government primarily tracks crime at primary and secondary schools through two

annual reports, while at least 15 states (Alabama, Arizona, Arkansas, California, Colorado, Hawaii, Idaho, Indiana, Minnesota, Nevada, New Hampshire, Oregon, Rhode Island, Utah and Virginia) have their own reporting requirements, according to the [Education Commission of the States](#).

The federal Gun-Free Schools Act requires schools to report all gun-related incidents to the Department of Education, which issues a [report](#) listing total infractions as well as state-by-state statistics. A separate report released by the departments of Education and Justice, called [Indicators of School Crime and Safety](#), examines school crime beyond incidents involving guns – including thefts, assaults and drug use.

But school safety experts criticize both federal reports and point out what they consider major shortcomings. Ken Trump, president of [National School Safety and Security Services](#), a Cleveland-based consulting firm focusing on school safety, called the federal statistics “underestimated numbers from a hodgepodge collection of academic surveys of yesteryear.”

The Gun-Free Schools Act report does not require officials to report incidents in which a non-student — such as a former student or an adult — brings a gun to school, Trump said. The report also does not list the specific schools where infractions occur and includes outdated information; this year’s report was released in April and tracked gun incidents from the 2003-2004 school year.

The joint report released by the departments of Education and Justice, meanwhile, relies primarily on surveys — not comprehensive school-by-school information, according to Trump. The statistics in that report also are not current. The most recent report, released in December 2006, tracks crime in the school year ending in spring 2005.

Trump advocates revisions to federal law and supports a bill by U.S. Rep. Carolyn McCarthy (D-N.Y.) that would replace the survey format of the Indicators of School Crime and Safety report with actual crime statistics. The bill, H.R. 354, remains stalled in committee.

Among states, Hawaii has one of the strongest reporting requirements in the country, according to Kathy Christie of the Education Commission of the States. Hawaii requires each school district to release a public report on the number of incidents involving violence, property destruction or loss and illicit substances.

Other states have more limited requirements. Arizona, for example, requires the reporting only of incidents in which school officials contact law enforcers, Christie said, noting that the best requirements for crime reporting are those that include comprehensive statistics on a school-by-school basis.

“Almost every state could say, ‘Yes, we do (require reporting),’ but how accessible is it and is it on the school level?” she said.

Meanwhile, only the federal government — not states — collects information on crime at college campuses. Under the Clery Act, the Department of Education gathers specific instances of crime on or near college campuses. Colleges that do not meet the Clery Act’s



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reporting requirements are subject to fines of up to \$27,500 per violation.

But only about two-thirds of colleges and universities “fully comply” with the Clery Act, often because of image concerns and because federal fines are considered insignificant, said Alison Kiss of [Security on Campus, Inc.](#), a nonprofit organization that works to improve safety on college campuses and assists with the enforcement of the Clery Act by examining the statistics that colleges are required to release.

“If there’s a school or college with 20,000 students and they’re reporting no forcible rapes, it raises a red flag for us,” Kiss said. That, according to Kiss, means one of two things: the school has “a utopian society or a culture of silence.”

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