

**STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF SCHOOL SAFETY
- A STUDY OF TWO HIGH-RISK SCHOOLS IN
THE SENTUL ZONE**

BY

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ABSTRACT

This study examines perceptions and attitudes regarding school safety at two high-risk boys' school, in the Sentul Zone, Wilayah Persekutuan. A total of 102 Form Four secondary school students participated in the study, wherein a 27-item questionnaire was used to obtain data on their perceptions of school safety and strategies of avoiding being harmed at school or while travelling to and from school. The study explores students' perceptions to discover which type of violent behavior they consider the major problem in their schools. The study also analyses the effect of fear of school crime and violence on victimized students toward their perceptions of personal safety. The finding showed that although school is perceived as a safe place, students are being physically victimized in their schools. Victimized students were likely to have a fear of crime while in school and travelling to and from school. Almost 10 percent of the students who fear attacks at school and 14 percent of them who fear attacks on the way to and from school have been absent from school. Students have also been avoiding certain places in school to avoid being harmed. The results also indicate the prevalence of students carrying weapons to school for self-protection and gang-related, and the existence of gang members in the school. Most of the students suggested that police and professional security personnel regularly patrolling schools might help to increase security and safety in their schools.

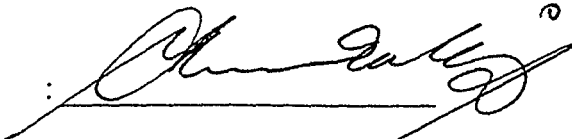
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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this project paper is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. Other sources are acknowledged by reference notes and a bibliography is appended.

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Dedication

This paper is dedicated to the children in our schools. It is my hope and prayer that in some small way this survey will help bring about a peaceful and serene environment where learning can take place and flourish.

Aisha r.a. said: A desert Arab came to Rasulullah s.a.w. and said: "Do you kiss children?, We do not kiss them". Rasulullah s.a.w said: "What can I do for you if Allah has taken away mercy from your heart?" (Bukhari, Muslim)

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

The prevalence of crime in schools has drawn increasing attention from the public and policymakers. Crime in and around schools has threatened the well being of students, school staff and members of the community. Police statistics reported that 1,719 students throughout Malaysia were involved in criminal activities in 1997 (Utusan Express, 1999). The involvement of students in social ills like drug addiction, loafing and free sex has reached a critical level (Utusan Express, 1997). In Kuala Lumpur, police arrested 442 secondary school students in the first 10 months of 1999 for being involved in criminal activities such as robbery, murder, molesting, vehicle thefts, house breaking and rioting (Utusan Express, 1999). The most striking fact revealed is that about 30% of secondary schools in Malaysia are threatened by gangsterism. A total of 459 out of 1,641 schools have been classified as high-risk with Penang being the worst affected state followed by Selangor and the Federal Territory with almost 48% each, Perak and Johor (Simrit Kaur, 2000). We cannot help but be aware of serious violence reported about students and their safety whether in or outside school across the country.

The tragic death of a 17 year old Methodist Girl School student who was sexually assaulted and murdered in May 1999 has alerted the authorities to take stern action to beef up the security of students whether when coming to and going from school or in the school compound (Utusan Express, 1999). Consequently, the Federal Territory Education Department (JPWP) has launched a Crime Prevention Club in schools as part of the effort to make schools crime free. Each club will be assigned a police personnel who will advise on monitoring risks and security of the school surroundings (Utusan Express, 1999). As a continuous measure, the Education Ministry, and the Royal Malaysia Police (PDRM) have agreed to strengthen the state and district levels consensus committees and expand the participation of students in Crime Prevention Clubs and police cadets (The Star, 2000).

Charged with the responsibility of managing our nation's schools, the Education Ministry is considering enhancing and standardizing the school security system to ensure the safety of schools and school buildings. Some schools employ watchmen while those in the urban areas engage private security firms to provide security services (Utusan Express, 1999). The ministry sent a circular to all schools to step up security measures and control. Principals were also asked to identify students in the high-risk group for early intervention purposes.

1.2 The need for safe schools

Parents are responsible for sending their children to school and the school has a corresponding responsibility to provide a safe environment. School should be safe and secure for all students, teachers, and staff members. Without a safe learning environment, teachers cannot teach and students cannot learn peacefully. But when crime, drugs and violence spill over from the streets into the school, providing a safe school environment becomes much harder. Therefore, students are exposed to crime and threats to personal safety at school, at school related activities during the day, or on the way to and from school (Nolin and Chandler, 1994 cited in National Center of Education Statistics, 1995).

School safety and security should influence the way the nation's schools operate, are designed and are constructed (Hylton, 1996). School administrators must accept the use of security principles and approaches and they must treat security as a requisite component of education and an integral part of the school infrastructure. They must consider the important roles that school climate and environment play in influencing the way in which the students, school staff and parents relate, to social problems, and interact with one another (Hylton, 1996). The obligation to provide a safe and secure environment is often complicated by the increasingly wide range of after school activities and public events that are held on school premises. Whether the threats to school safety come from outside the school or from the students themselves, schools must be made safe for teaching and learning.

The need to ensure the safety of school surroundings is crucial because school violence will certainly affect teachers and students in the teaching and learning process. Creating safe schools requires the commitment of schools, the community and policymakers to ensure that the students feel safe in school. Understanding the perceptions of students on safety and violence in their daily activities is one step that can be taken to create better school conditions and surroundings. Safer schools tend to be more effective, experiencing higher academic achievement and fewer disciplinary problems (Drug Strategies, 1998).

Perceptions of school violence are significant because feeling unsafe is not conducive to learning or to teaching. Out of fear, some students avoid specific places in school such as restrooms or certain hallways (Bastian and Taylor, 1991). According to Garbarino (cited in Bickford, 1997), the feelings of danger and fear have extreme consequences for the development of children and adolescents; the measures individuals take to defend themselves against the perceived danger of their social settings can adversely affect their behavior and attitudes. Findings revealed that school violence had an impact on student performance (Cairns et al, 1989; Grimson and Shepard 1989 cited in Bickford, 1997).

1.3 Problem statement

The safety of schools relates to what is often described as the 'school climate' (Center of Violence Prevention, 1998). A school climate is often assessed in terms of

how safe students, teachers, school staff and parents perceive the school to be. Perception of safety and feelings about the school reveal important information about a school climate. Do students feel safe at school? Do these feeling and perceptions translate into behavior, which reveals that the school climate is believed to be unsafe? Do students stay home from school because they feel unsafe? What are the students' strategies of avoiding being harmed at school?

Obtaining answers to these questions by using surveys, for instance, can help determine how safe a school is and will provide baseline measures that will highlight safety concerns. Surveys are an important and useful source of information about school safety and the well-being of students. The safe school plan can then be developed to address these safety concerns, and steps can be taken to address them.

1.4 Purpose of the study

The purposes of the study are:

1. To gather information about students' perceptions of safety and violence in or around school;
2. To determine students' strategies of avoiding harm at school; and
3. To determine whether students' experience of crime and violence have an effect on their perceptions of safety in school.

1.5 Significance of the study

Although school crime and violence acts are not considered alarming in Malaysia, there was an increase of nefarious acts such as rape, molesting, arson, assault and gang fights committed on school premises. Among the public, there is a growing perception that schools are not as safe as they were before (The Star, 2000). A single act of violence within a school has the potential to destroy any possibility of a safe and orderly environment (Hill and Hill, 1994).

Therefore, it is important for educators, especially school administrators, to understand students' perceptions of safety and fear of violence because students spend six to seven hours a day away from their parents under the school control. The results of this research will provide a clear understanding of students' perceptions of safety and violence in school. School administrators must take account of what the students think and feel regarding these issues when adopting security policies. Incorporating their perspectives on security issues will increase the possibility that their concerns are addressed and that policies are relevant to the danger they face.

1.6 Limitation and assumption

This study is limited to two selected high-risk secondary boys' schools in the Sentul Zone, and limited to a sample of 102 Form Four students. Therefore, the results of the findings cannot be generalized nationwide.

The data gathering techniques will be survey oriented. The instrument will rely on the respondent's ability and willingness to answer the questions honestly. The formal procedures that will be followed when administering the instrument stress the importance of the respondent's honest answers. This certainly will not guarantee that we will receive an accurate response.

1.7 Definition of terms

For the purpose of this study, the following terms are defined as follows:

1.7.1 Safety

A concern about physical or emotional security; a preference for social and physical settings that provide protection and that minimize the chances of being attacked or hurt (Simmons, 1999).

1.7.2 School Crime

Any criminal activity that is committed within the school premises.

1.7.3 Violence

The actual threatened use of physical, verbal, sexual, or emotional power, intimidation, or harassment by or against individuals or groups which results in

physical and/or psychological harm, or is harmful to the social well-being of an individual or group of individuals (MacDonald, 1997).

1.7.4 Gang

An ongoing loosely organized association of three or more persons, whether formal or informal, that has a common name or signs, whose members engage, either individually or collectively, in violent or other forms of illegal behavior (National Center for Education Statistics, 1995).

1.7.5 Vandalism

The willful damage of school property including bombing, arson, graffiti and other acts that cause property damage (National Center for Education Statistics, 1995).

1.7.6 Violent Crime

Physical attacks or taking property from a student directly by means of force, weapons, or threats.

1.7.7 Victimization

A crime as it affects one individual person or household.

1.7.8 High-risk School

Schools in high-risk areas identified as locations which are prone to criminal activities.

1.8 The organization of the study

This study is organized into five chapters. Chapter 1 discusses the problem statements, the purpose of the study, the limitations of the study, the definitions of terms, the assumptions and the importance of the study. The literature review on the definitions of the safe school, students' perspectives of school safety and violence, their strategies of avoiding being harmed and the effect of fear of school crime and violence are covered in chapter 2. Chapter 3 describes the research design and methodology used. The type of study, the sample and sampling technique, the data collection technique, instrument and data analysis technique are described in the said chapter.

Chapter 4 consists of the data analysis. It discusses the results of the findings concerning the substantive questions and objectives of the study. Chapter 5 presents the conclusion of the study. The major findings are discussed, followed by a discussion of the recommendations and suggestions for future research.