



# Crime & Punishment

James Alan Fox on criminal behavior and the justice system

CAMPUS CRIME , MURDER AND MAYHEM

## Back-to-school fears

Posted by James Alan Fox, Crime and Punishment January 2, 2013 10:30 AM

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With the holiday break ending, millions of youngsters will be returning to the classroom. Will they do so fearful that an incident like the Sandy Hook shooting might happen in their school? Will parents worry as they watch their children climb aboard the yellow school bus that they might not return safe and sound at the end of the day?

The recent massacre in Newtown, Conn. has put the issue of school safety center stage in the public and political discourse. Notwithstanding the fact that for school-aged children, the risk of serious violence while at school is significantly lower than at other times and at other places, the enormity of the carnage at the Sandy Hook compels us to think long and hard about school security.

This is not the first time that Americans have been forced by tragedy to confront the issue. The string of school shootings that marked the late 1990s -- no less than seven multiple-victim shootings including Columbine -- changed the face of public education, and had many Americans questioning their faith in the notion that schools were safe places for children to grow intellectually and socially.

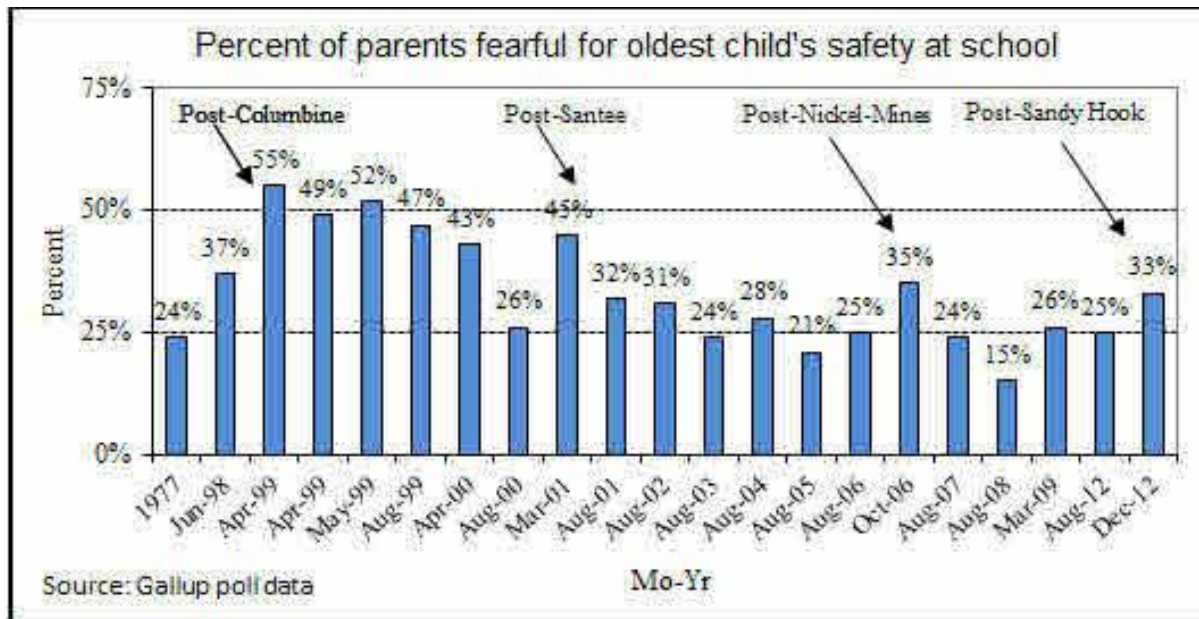
Back then, each episode of schoolyard terror incited widespread fear, dread, and anxiety. Each recurrence of someone running amok in the hallways of a school intensified concerns that school shootings were not just an occasional and frightening aberration, but a new and persistent crime wave that should place schools everywhere on high alert. Even Dan Rather, one of the nation's best-known and well-respected TV journalists, declared school shootings to be an epidemic.

In reaction to the late 1990s assault on schools, the Gallup polling organization incorporated school violence and safety as a regular theme in its ongoing program of survey research. Gallup had not examined the issue since 1977, when a quarter of parents surveyed across America indicated a concern for their children's safety at school. Twenty years later, Gallup was propelled by a series of multiple-fatality shootings during the 1997-98 school year to resurrect the topic for its June 1998 national survey.

Gallup then repeated its scan of public opinion related to school violence in three surveys fielded within a month after the appalling Columbine massacre. Since Columbine, Gallup routinized its questions regarding school violence and safety in surveys coinciding with the start of each school year, as well as at exceptional points in time, such as immediately following the March 2000 school shooting in Santee,

Calif., the October 1996 massacre at an Amish schoolhouse in Lancaster, Penn., and, of course, last month's shooting at Sandy Hook.

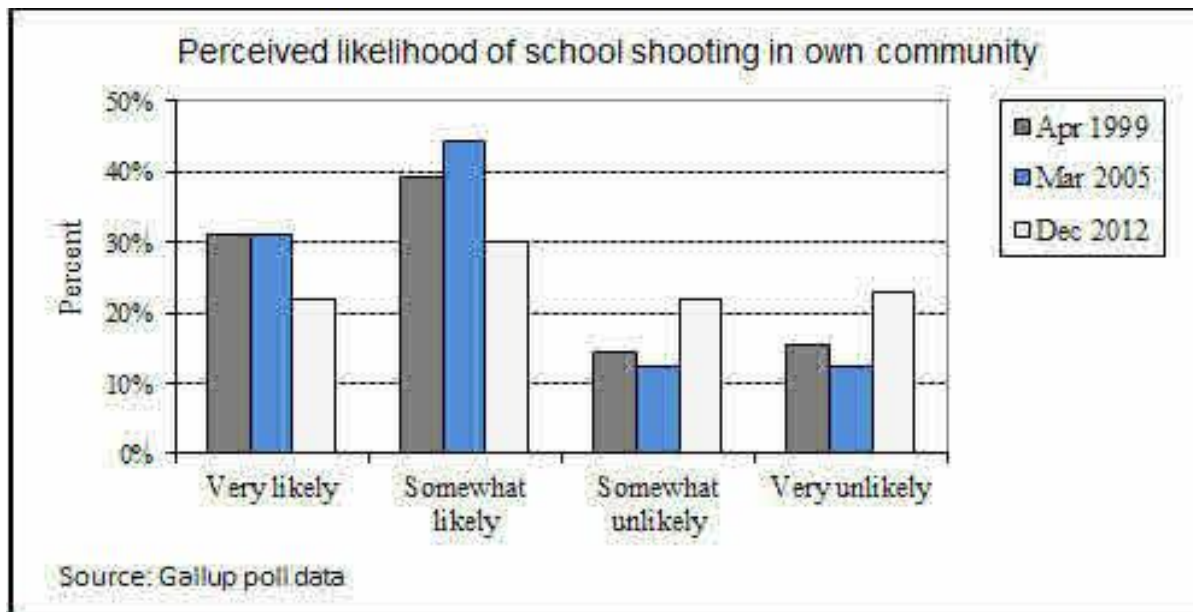
The figure below summarizes the overall results of the sequence of Gallup polls related to a question presented to parents about whether they fear for the safety of their oldest child while he or she is at school. Clearly, the Columbine shooting had a strong effect on the respondents' sense of security for their children, as the majority of respondents (55%) surveyed on the day following the April 20th murder indicated being afraid. However, as Americans faced new challenges during the decade after Columbine (precipitated by the 9/11 terrorist attack), the school-related fears of parents gradually subsided, despite short-term spikes linked to certain high-profile incidents during the decade. By the late 2000s, as the level of panic and media hype dissipated, the percentage of parents worried about their child's safety settled back to 26%, just about the same level as decades earlier.



The latest poll, taken in the wake of the Sandy Hook shooting, revealed another bump in fear. Of course, the spike is nowhere near as pronounced as in the late 1990s when many Americans thought schools were under siege. Perhaps we are better able to keep such events in perspective; they are rare anomalies, not a sign of a new and frightening epidemic.

Although Gallup has focused its attention on parents and other adults, available data pertaining to how students have responded paint a different picture. Criminologist Lynn Addington of American University compared student reports from the National Crime Victimization Survey School Supplement collected just before and just after the April 1999 Columbine High shooting, finding only a marginal increase in fear in terms of both breadth and magnitude. Specifically, the percentage of students, ages 12 to 18, who indicated feeling apprehensive about safety while at school rose by only 4%. And for those who did report heightened concern, the extent of increase was rather modest. Overall, the level of fear among students prior to Columbine was fairly low, and after Columbine it was just not quite so low.

To some extent, fear stems from a belief that a dreaded event has some reasonable likelihood of occurring. Based on surveys conducted by Gallup after the April 1999 Columbine shooting, after the March 2005 shooting in Red Lake, Minn., and then after the Sandy Hook mass murder, a majority of respondents reported feeling that it a similar school shooting was at least somewhat likely to occur in their own community (see figure below).



The concerns of parents are certainly understandable, even if out of proportion with the actual risk. After all, they don't have any control while their kids are off at school. However, the actual likelihood that any given child will be murdered while at or on the way to school is about one-in-two-million. The risk is about the same that of being struck down by lightning and far less than other perils that kids face routinely, such as a fatal bicycle accident or a pool drowning.

It is important to maintain perspective of the risk when considering the need and advisability of arming teachers, staging lockdown drills, purchasing bullet-resistant backpacks or similar measures that can increase anxiety rather than alleviate it. In whatever we do, let's not pass our fears down to school children by implying through action that there is a target their backs.