WORKING TOGETHER TO IMPROVE SCHOOL SAFETY:

An Evaluation of the Park West Problem-Solving Collaborative Initiative

Milton Mino, Research Associate

Vera Institute of Justice
April 2002

Additional copies can be obtained from the communications department of the Vera Institute of Justice, 233 Broadway, 12th floor, New York, New York, 10279, (212) 334-1300. An electronic version of this report is available on Vera's web site, www.vera.org.

Requests for additional information about the research described in this report should be directed to Milton Mino, Research Associate, at the above address or mmino@vera.org.

Executive Summary

Schools around the country have sought to improve the safety of their students, teachers and staff. To accomplish this they have instituted a range of safety measures, from creating afterschool programs and using metal detectors to increasing their number of school safety personnel. In the fall of 1999, the Citizens Committee for New York City, the New York City Police Department Division of School Safety and the city's Board of Education created the Park West Problem Solving Collaborative Initiative at Manhattan's Park West High School, a school that has struggled to reduce its number of school safety incidents in recent years. The project intended to improve Park West's safety by bringing together students, teachers, parents, and school safety agents to create safety projects of their own design. Although the groups shared an interest in making the school safer, they had not worked together before. Project planners believed that by pooling their resources and insights they could make the school a safer place and improve their relationships with one another.

Researchers from the Vera Institute of Justice examined how the Collaborative project was implemented at the school. They also examined changes in safety during the project's two years by analyzing incident data from the police department. In addition, researchers surveyed the school's junior and senior students and conducted group interviews with students, teachers and school safety agents about their perceptions of changes in safety.

Park West's experience has implications for other schools and organizations interested in using a collaborative safety model. The researchers found that one of the project's first tasks—identifying safety problems through speaking with students—was an effective way to address short-term safety concerns. The project also encountered obstacles, especially in recruiting participants. Like many New York City high schools, Park West is not a neighborhood school and potential participants were reluctant to stay late to work on the project. Recruiting parents was especially difficult because they would have to travel to the school to participate.

Several changes during the project's second year helped it to recruit participants. With the principal's cooperation the project was able to use existing school staff, who were well known in the school community and who could identify prospective participants, to help facilitate the project. The student activities coordinator was designated as the main participant recruiter and the vice principal as the school-based point person. The project also held its planning workshops during the school day rather than after school. The difficulty in recruiting parents, however, persisted and they were the only group that did not participate.

The school's principal and head of school safety made important safety changes during these years that were unrelated to the project. While the Collaborative project's impact therefore cannot be separated from the impact of the other changes, both of the safety measures the researchers examined—a student survey and police incident data—showed an improvement in Park's West safety.

Table of Contents

Introduction

Background and Research Methods

Like many schools around the country, Park West High School, located in Manhattan's Hell's Kitchen neighborhood, has struggled to improve safety for its students, teachers and staff. Many of the incidents that threaten safety at the school have been gang related and situations have often been exacerbated by Park West's proximity to neighboring schools. Moreover, the school's rate of safety incidents is higher than that of other New York City public high schools and, consequently, Park West's safety troubles have been covered by the city's newspapers.

To improve the school's safety, in 1999 the Citizens Committee for New York City, the New York City Police Department School Safety Division, and the Board of Education created the Park West Problem Solving Collaborative Initiative. This project, originally planned for one school year but later extended for an additional year, was funded by a grant from the U.S. Department of Justice Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (C.O.P.S.) 1999 School-Based Partnership Program. To fulfill part of the project's grant requirement, the Citizens Committee asked the Vera Institute of Justice to evaluate the project. We describe the results of our evaluation in this report.

The Park West Problem Solving Collaborative Initiative, referred to as the Collaborative throughout this report, had two goals. The first was to create a model school safety collaboration involving Park West's students, teachers, parents and school safety agents. These groups, which the Collaborative identified as the school's "stakeholders," share an interest in making Park West safer, but their efforts have usually been uncoordinated and therefore inefficient. By bringing them together, the Collaborative attempted to create a unified and more effective response to improving school safety. The project's second goal was to reduce the school's high number of safety incidents. It sought to accomplish this in two phases—first, by identifying short-term problems that the school could act on immediately, and second, by addressing long-term safety objectives through six projects created by teams of students, parents, teachers and school safety agents. The Citizens Committee provided technical support and $1,500 grants to finance each of these six projects and also assigned a part-time consultant to work on the Collaborative.

Our study focuses on the way the Collaborative implemented its safety initiative. We examined how the project was implemented despite the obstacles it faced during the first year. We also analyze changes in the number and type of school safety incidents that occurred at the school over the course of the project, as well as how student perceptions of safety changed over this period. We did not conduct an impact evaluation because several new safety procedures, unrelated to the Collaborative, were instituted at Park West during the project's two years. Since these changes affected the school's safety during the time the Collaborative was running its project, we cannot isolate the project's impact from that of other school safety measures. Examining how the Collaborative was implemented at Park West High School offers useful lessons for similar projects and for other schools interested in instituting a collaborative safety model.

This report is organized in three sections. This introduction presents an overview of recent national trends in school safety, a description of Park West's students, background on the school's safety problems and an overview of the Collaborative. The second section discusses the implementation of the Collaborative project, the challenges it faced, and the corrective steps it took to overcome them. Finally, the third section examines changes in Park West's safety during the project's two school years. We assessed these changes by analyzing NYPD school safety incident data and by surveying 150 of the school's juniors and seniors about their perceptions of changes in safety. We conclude with a set of recommendations for schools considering a similar collaborative safety model, based on Park West's experiences.

Research Limitations

Evaluating changes in school safety presents many challenges, including choosing a reliable measure of school safety incidents, developing a representative sampling method to survey students, and evaluating the process of bringing people together to improve their schools. These issues are often complicated, as they were in our study, by the constraints of limited funding.

Our analysis of changes in Park West's school safety during the project's two years was limited in two ways. First, we used NYPD School Safety Division incident data as our measure of changes in school safety incidents. Because these are incidents that are recorded by the school's safety agents they usually represent the most serious school incidents, such as assaults, or those that are the result of contraband found during scanning with the school's metal detectors, such as weapons or drugs. Less serious incidents that also affect school safety are often not included. For example, a student may receive detention or a referral to the school's Dean as the result of an incident, but this event may not require a school safety agent and therefore would not be recorded in the Division of School Safety's data. Consequently, the data undercount the total number of incidents committed.

Second, the results of our survey on changes in student perceptions of safety are limited by the sample of students that we interviewed. While most safety incidents involve freshmen and sophomore students, we were only able to interview the school's juniors and seniors. Our preferred sample group was sophomore students who had attended Park West during the previous school year. These students could compare the school's safety with safety the previous year and were also among the students most involved in safety incidents. However, because freshmen and sophomores attend classes together, accurately identifying our desired sample group presented us with several logistical and staffing problems that were beyond our study's resources to resolve. Also, because we surveyed students during one school day and towards the end of the school year, students who were absent or who had dropped out or transferred from the school were not included in our survey.

We attempted to minimize these limitations by using more than one measure of school safety to assess changes in Park West's safety—police incident data and a survey on student perceptions of safety. While each type of data presented its own restrictions, we have more confidence in the overall results of these measures if the safety changes they show are consistent

with one another, than if they seem to contradict each other. As we discuss in the third section, both safety measures were consistent with one another in showing an improvement in Park West's safety. Also, our student survey allowed us to gauge how students in two of the school's four grades—students who had attended the school during the previous year— perceived changes in safety. Additionally, while police incident data do not include all of the incidents committed at schools, they do capture many of them, including the most serious ones such as weapons or drug possessions and assaults. Moreover, because the Division of School Safety collects incident data from every high school, we were able to compare Park West's incidents with those at schools citywide.

In evaluating how the Citizens Committee implemented the Collaborative, we identified two themes that are beyond the scope of this evaluation but that merit further investigation—paying teachers and students for participating in safety projects and examining how participants select and develop their projects. These topics have direct implications for schools and planners interested in replicating this type of safety model, and they raise important questions for future research. For example, will teachers and students work on an afterschool safety project if they are not paid? If so, what is the best way to recruit them? When participants meet to develop a safety project, how do they decide what type of project to create? Is there one person who leads the discussion or is there a consensus? We do not answer these questions in this report but suggest them as areas for future study.

Recent Trends in School Safety: A National Perspective

Schools across the country are safer today than they were five years ago. According to the most recent data available from the U.S. Department of Education, school safety has improved in several important areas.[1] For example, between 1995 and 1999 fewer students became victims of crimes while at school and fewer carried weapons.[2] During this period gangs were also less prevalent. The percentage of middle- and high-school students who reported street gangs at their schools declined from almost one-third to less than one-fifth of students.[3] Almost half as many kids said that they feared being attacked or injured at school.[4] In fact, in 1999 students were

---

[1] *Indicators of School Crime and Safety, 2001*. U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement. Because of the different ways in which school safety incidents are recorded around the country, calculating nationwide statistics on safety incidents often involves combining data from different sources, some of which may not always be fully comparable. To calculate its statistics on school safety the Department of Education used data from various sources, including the Bureau of Justice Statistics, National Center for Educational Statistics and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

[2] Ibid. Between 1995 and 1999 the percentage of students who reported being victims of crime at school decreased from 10% to 8%. Between 1993 and 1999 the percentage of students in grade 9 through 12 who reported carrying a weapon on school property within the previous 30 days declined from 12% to 7%.

[3] Ibid. The percentage of students ages 12 through 18 who reported that street gangs were present at school during the previous 6 months declined from 28.5% in 1995 to 17.3% in 1999.

[4] Ibid. The percentage of students ages 12 through 18 who reported fearing being attacked or harmed at school during the previous 6 months declined from 9% in 1995 to 5% in 1999.

more than twice as likely to be the victims of a serious violent crime while away from school than at school.[5]

The trend in school safety incidents and in crimes against children in general reveals two contrasting points. First, crimes against children, both at school and away, have declined in recent years. These improvements have occurred in important and substantive areas of school safety, such as those noted above. Second, even with these improvements children are the victims of a staggering number of crimes. In 1999, for example, more than 4.5 million crimes were committed against children, both at and away from school. The graphs and statistics that follow illustrate these points and also show that despite the common perception that schools are dangerous places, children are, in fact, often safer from personal harm at school than away from it.

In 1999 students ages 12 through 18 were the victims of 2.5 million crimes at school. About seven percent of these were serious violent offenses, such as sexual assault, robbery and aggravated assault. Theft was the most common crime, accounting for two-thirds of all offenses that year. In that same year 2.1 million crimes were committed against children while away from school, almost a quarter of which were serious violent offenses.

From 1992 to 1999 the number of crimes against children declined, both at school and away from school (Figure 1-1).[6] Overall, however, incidents against children were more common at school than away. Most of these in-school crimes involved theft—a non-violent offense (Figure 1-2).

Figure 1-1

Total Crimes Against Students Ages 12 through 18 per 1,000 Students, 1992 to 1999

---
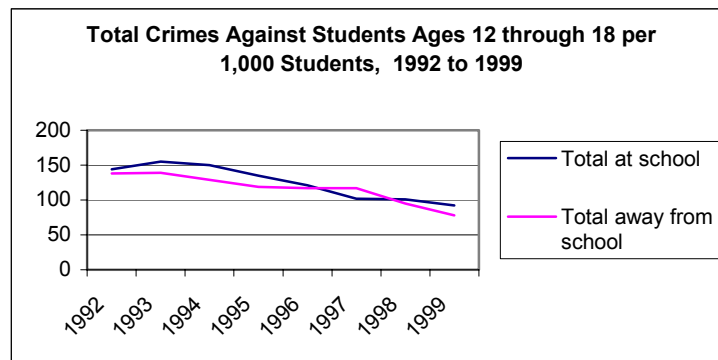
[5] Ibid. In 1999 students ages 12 through 18 were victims of 476,000 nonfatal serious violent crimes (rape, sexual assault, robbery and aggravated assault) away from school and 186,000 such crimes at school.

[6] Ibid. Figures 1-1 through 1-4 are based on Department of Education data that were obtained from the U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics' National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS). The NCVS is a national survey of 50,000 households concerning both crimes that were reported to the police and unreported crimes. The incident rates shown are based on the number of crimes committed per 1,000 students.

Figure 1-2

Thefts Against Students Ages 12 through 18 per 1,000 Students, 1992 to 1999

──	Theft at school
──	Theft away from school
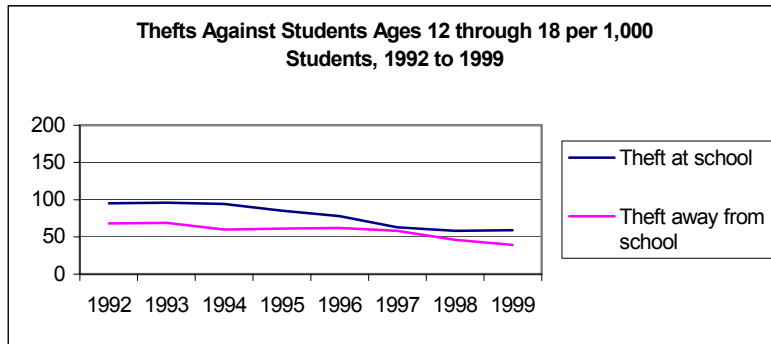
By contrast, violent crimes and serious violent crimes against students were more likely to occur away from school (Figures 1-3 and 1-4). Violent crimes are defined as rape, sexual assault, robbery and simple assault. Serious violent crimes include these same first three offenses but also include aggravated assault instead of simple assault.

Figure 1-3

Violent Crimes Against Children Ages 12 through 18 per 1,000 students, 1992-1999

──	Violent crime at school
──	Violent crime away from school

Figure 1-4

Serious Violent Crimes Against Children Ages 12 through 18 per 1,000 students, 1992-1999

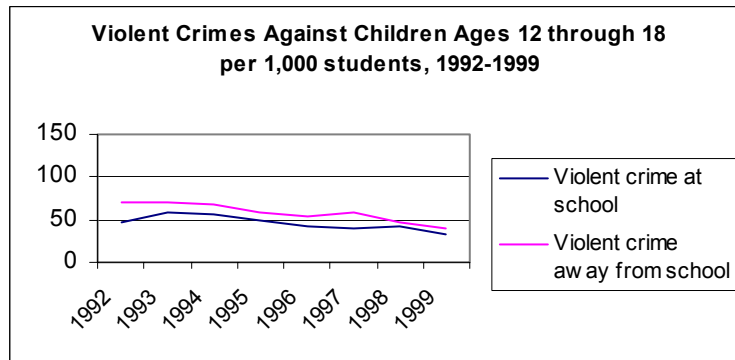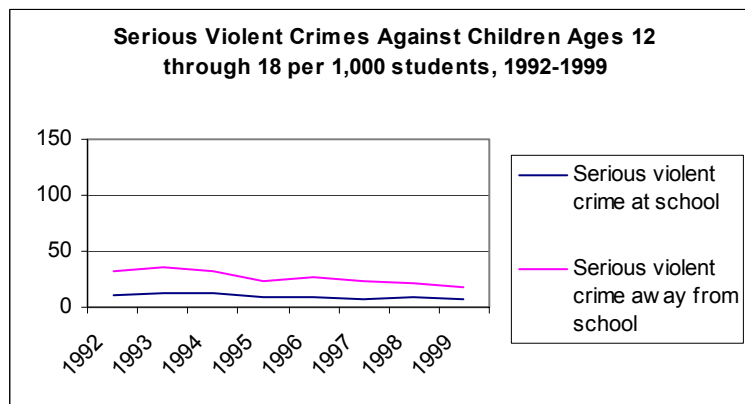|	
──	Serious violent crime at school
──	Serious violent crime away from school

Male students were more likely to be victims of crime than female students. In 1999, there were 98 crimes against boys per 1,000 students versus 85 for girls. High school students in their freshmen years were the most likely of all high school students to be victimized. By contrast, high school seniors were the least likely to have a crime committed against them. Figure 1-5 shows the percentage of students ages 12 through 18 who reported being victims of crimes at school in the past six months. [7]

Figure 1-5

Percentage of Students Ages 12 through 18 Who Reported Criminal Victimization at School During Previous 6 Months, 1995 and 1999
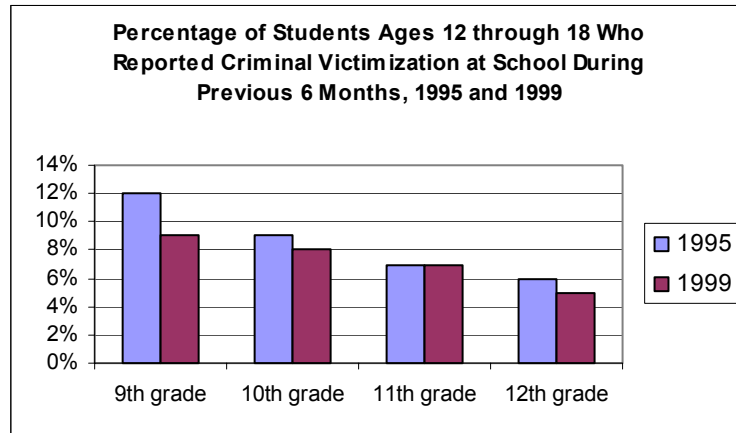
Finally, over the ten-year span from 1989 to 1999, the number of gangs at schools increased, though beginning the 1995 this rate declined. (Figure 1-6.) Also, in 1999 public schools were five times more likely to have gangs than private schools. Minority students, particularly Hispanics, were more likely to attend schools with gangs than white students (Figure 1-7).

Figure 1-6

Percentage of Students Reporting Street Gangs at their Schools, 1989, 1995 and 1999

---
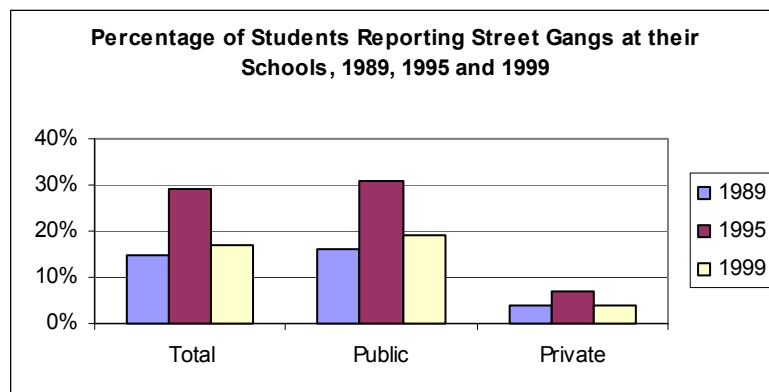
[7] Ibid. Figures 1-5 through 1-7 were calculated by the Department of Education using data from the U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics and the School Crime Supplement to the National Crime Victimization Survey.

Figure 1-7

Students Ages 12-18 Who Reported Street Gangs at their Schools By Race/Ethnicity, 1989, 1995 and 1999
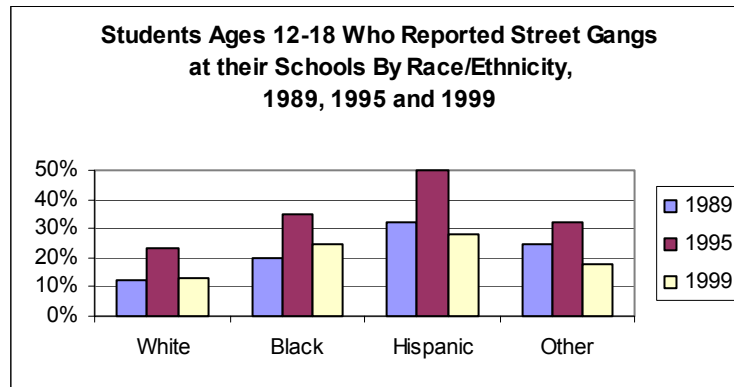
Overview of Park West High School

Student Profile. Park West High School is part of a cluster of 12 schools within a seven block area in Manhattan's Hell's Kitchen neighborhood. The high school offers special academic programs in culinary arts, aviation, health careers and technology. According to the New York State Education Department, 2,208 students were enrolled at the high school during the 1999-2000 school year.[8] As Figure 1-8 shows, more than eighty percent of these students were in freshman or soph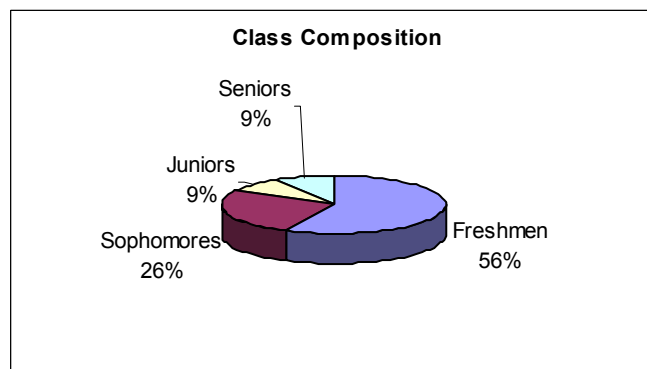omore classes. These proportions suggest that the majority of the students are held back, drop out, or transfer to other schools after their first or second years.

Figure 1-8

Class Composition

Seniors 9%

Juniors 9%

Sophomores 26%

Freshmen 56%

Black and Hispanic students make up 41 percent and 55 percent of the student body, respectively.[9] White students account for only two percent of the students and only three percent are Asian or from other ethnic groups. Unlike at many other public high schools in New York City,

---

[8] *1999-2000 High School Annual Report: Park West High School.* New York State Education Department, Division of Assessment and Accountability.

[9] Ibid. Citywide, New York City high schools are 16% white, 37% black, 35% Hispanic and 12% Asian and other.

few of these students are recent immigrants. Only five percent came to the United States within the past three years, about half the citywide average. Slightly over half of Park West's students are eligible for free school lunch, a commonly used indicator of financial need, compared to 47 percent citywide. Ninth and tenth grade students, who account for more than eighty percent of the student body, are even poorer. Three-quarters of these students were eligible for free lunch in 1999, compared to 66 percent citywide. The school's gender composition is also distinct from most of the city's high schools, with boys making up sixty percent of the student body, versus 47 percent at other high schools.

Figure 1-9
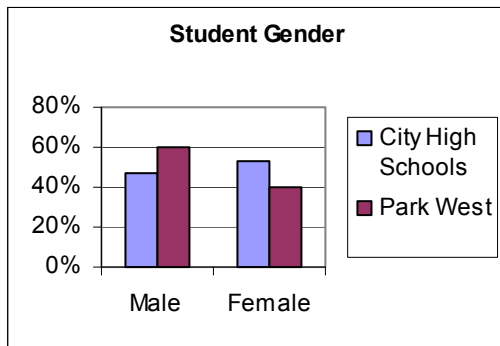
Figure 1-10

Figure 1-11
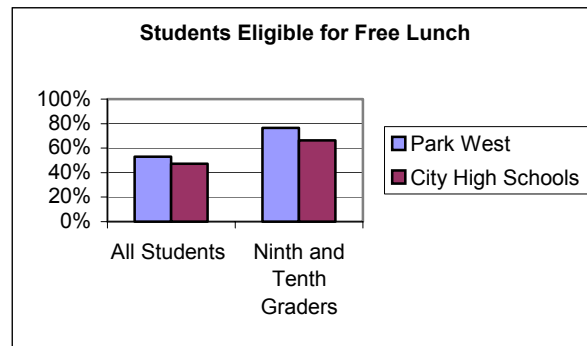
Student academic performance, as measured by the Regents examination, lags behind that of students at other New York City public high schools. Only 14 percent of Park West students passed the English part of the Regents examination in 2000, compared with 39 percent of high school students citywide. Thirty percent passed the Math section, versus 41 percent at other high schools. Despite these statistics, the students who do graduate from Park West express a higher than average desire for continuing their education. Almost three-quarters of the class of 2000 said that they planned to attend two- or four-year colleges, compared to 63 percent of their counterparts citywide.[10]

---
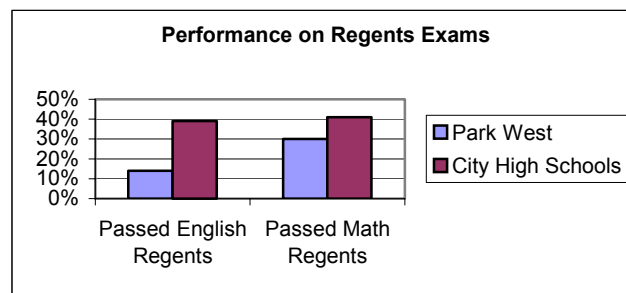
[10] Ibid. In 2000, 71.9% of Park West's graduates said that they planned on attending 2- or 4-year colleges versus 62.6% of high school graduates citywide.

School Safety. Park West has struggled to reduce its high rate of student safety incidents. During the 1999-2000 school year, there were 20 incidents per 1,000 students that involved the police, double the city's average. This incidence rate is also higher than that of other high schools with similar student characteristics.[11] While the rate of student incidents that involved the police is high, the rate of student suspensions is only 24 per 1,000 students, half the citywide average. As discussed in the next section of this report, the school's principal sometimes used school "catchment areas" as an alternative to suspensions.

Park West's safety incidents have often been aggravated by its proximity to other schools. It is surrounded by 11 other schools which enroll over 11,000 students. This density of students has not only intensified the school's safety problems and but also prompted strife with local residents and merchants. In 1999, the neighborhood's Community Board noted the student density problem: [12]

> The reason can best be seen in the case of Park West High School and Graphic Communications Arts (high school), which are within one block of each other. Most of these schools' combined enrollment of 5,000 students comes from other boroughs. This has led to clogged neighborhood streets at varying arrival and dismissal times, problems at subways and other transportations points, and disruptive situations affecting Community Board No. 4 residents and businesses.

The city's media have covered Park West's safety problems. A March 28, 1999, article in *The New York Post,* "Park West HS: Prep School for Prison," referred to the high school as "a school out of control—where sex, drugs and violence sabotage reading, writing and math."[13] A year earlier an article in *The New York Times* cited a New York City Board of Education study, conducted by the Vera Institute of Justice, that found that Park West High School had the highest number of violent incidents of Manhattan's high schools. [14]

Often the incidents at Park West—whether between Park West's students or between Park West students and those from rival schools—have been gang related. Students described a gang culture at the school during a group interview with Vera researchers in December 2000. The students identified the Bloods, Latin Kings and Zulu Nation as the most prominent among the gangs at Park West. According to the students, the threat of being assaulted by a gang member was greatest for freshman students, who are frequently hazed by upperclassmen. They also noted, however, that though gangs still posed a safety concern, their threat had diminished during their time at the school.

---

[11] Ibid. Similar schools are schools whose entering ninth and tenth graders are similar on a number of characteristics, such as daily attendance rates, standardized test scores, and proportion over-age for grade. The incident rate for similar schools during this period was 16 per 1,000 students.
[12] 1999 *District Needs Statement.*
[13] Alvarez, Maria, Park West HS: Prep School for Prison, *The New York Post*, 28 March 1999.
[14] Archibold, Randal. "Serious Crime Dips in School, but Total Incidents Rise." *The New York Times*, 18 September 1998.

Despite these problems, Park West's teachers appear to be committed to the school. Their turnover rate is average for New York City, with 72 percent having taught at Park West for at least two years.[15] They also possess more teaching experience than their counterparts at other high schools. Almost three-quarters have worked as teachers for at least five years, compared to 65 percent of teachers citywide. Finally, 82 percent of Park West's teachers have earned at least a master's degree and 84 percent are fully licensed and permanently assigned to teach at the school, both average for New York City high school teachers.[16]

The Collaborative Project

Attempting to reduce the high rate of safety incidents at Park West, the Citizens Committee for New York City and the New York City Police Department's Division of School Safety launched the Park West High School Collaborative Problem-Solving Initiative in the fall of 1999. The Citizens Committee assigned a part-time coordinator to the Collaborative and provided the project with technical assistance.

Many groups have a stake in ensuring that schools are safe. These groups range from the federal government and local community boards to neighborhood merchants and the students who attend school. For the purposes of their project, the Citizens Committee identified Park West's students, parents, teachers, and school safety agents as the groups that they would recruit to work on the Collaborative. These groups, which they referred to as the project's "stakeholders," share an interest in reducing disruptive, violent, and harassing incidents at Park West. Their strategies for accomplishing this, however, have often been uncoordinated. Also, these groups have not worked together and they are often suspicious of one another. By drawing these groups together, planners at the Citizens Committee attempted to develop a more effective way to improve school safety; they hoped doing so could also improve the groups' relationships with one another.

The project planned to reduce the number of safety incidents at the school in two phases. First, the Collaborative would identify specific safety problems through individual and group interviews with students, teachers and school safety agents. Planners imagined most of these problems could be resolved through short-term solutions, such as increasing the use of metal detectors. Next, the groups would participate in problem-solving workshops where they would develop their own safety projects. These projects would address long-term safety problems, such as freshman victimization by gangs. The participants ultimately developed a diverse combination of projects, ranging from starting a weight lifting class run by school safety agents to publishing a student newsletter.

---

[15] *1999-2000 High School Annual Report: Park West High School.* 72% of all NYC high school teachers have taught at their school for more than two years.
[16] Ibid. 81% of NYC high school teachers have a master's degree or higher and 82% are fully licensed and permanently assigned to their school.

Project Implementation

Identifying Problems and Successes

The Citizens Committee's first task was to identify specific safety problems at Park West, a process sometimes called scanning in other school safety models. To this end, in the fall of 1999 the Citizens Committee conducted group interviews with students, teachers and school safety agents. The coordinator facilitated the interviews and implemented this initial phase of the project. Researchers from the Vera Institute attended the group interviews as part of the evaluation.

As it turned out, participants identified safety successes as well as problems. The project's coordinator learned encouraging information during these sessions. Participants said school safety had improved appreciably since the new principal assumed Park West's administration a year earlier. Citizens Committee planners had anticipated that gangs would be one of the school's main safety problems. While they were still a safety risk, students described gang activities at the school as less prevalent than in previous years. The group interview participants suggested a few reasons for this welcome reduction in gang prevalence and overall improvement in safety. Two involved changes in Park West leadership positions—a new principal and a new head of school safety.

Principal Took Steps To Improve Safety. Teachers and students perceived the previous principal as ineffective at tackling the school's mounting safety problems, and they credited the new principal with having improved the school's safety. The new principal instituted several safety measures after arriving at Park West.

One of the first was the creation of "catchment areas" within the school, where students who skipped classes or got into fights had to remain until the end of the day. The catchment areas physically separate disruptive students from the rest of the student body. They were also meant to deter other students from skipping classes or getting into fights. Catchment areas were used as an alternative to a school suspension, which was considered a more serious disciplinary punishment, and their existence may account for the school's lower than average suspension rate, noted earlier.

Additionally, during the project's second year, the principal made two changes that limited interactions between freshmen and older teens. He changed the school's class schedule so that freshmen students did not change classes with upperclassmen, reducing the possibilities for conflict. He also changed the location of classes so that most freshmen and older students did not have classes on the same floor, further limiting opportunities for victimization.

Safety Supervisor Saw New Role for Agents. The students also credited the school's new Level Three school safety agent. This supervising agent was assigned to Park West soon after the December 1998 transfer of school safety responsibilities from the Board of Education to the NYPD Division of School Safety. He saw a new role for the twelve school safety agents he

supervised. This agent sought to reduce the number of safety incidents while also improving relations between students and school safety agents. He explained how he approached the job when he first arrived at Park West:

> The way I took this job is that Park West was labeled wrongly, falsely accused. Starting with the officers. I thought they never got a fair shake…I see there were great officers here. They were just never given great leadership. So my whole goal was to come in here and show these guys (school safety agents), this is about love, it ain't about disciplinary, it ain't about busting these kids' chops. And it ain't about having confrontation with the staff…we are professionals that we are supposed to be, so teachers can teach, and students can learn…

In practice this meant enforcing school safety policy while being accessible to students and responsive to their concerns. This supervisor created a weight-lifting class for students and school safety agents, as one of the Collaborative's six individual projects.

Increased Police Presence Around School. The students also said that the increased number of NYPD officers that had been assigned to patrol the area around their school had improved safety. Fights have often erupted around the school's perimeter and, in fact, many of the students considered these areas to be more dangerous than the school itself. The uniformed police officers were visible on the blocks immediately around the school and throughout the nearby train stations. Their presence made it easier for students to arrive and leave the school in safety.

Involving Students in Identifying Problems

While the students who participated in the focus groups said that their school seemed safer, they also identified several safety problems. Though gangs were less of a threat, students said they still retained a presence at the school. Moreover, freshman students were especially vulnerable to gang recruitment and victimization. Older students and gang members often singled out freshmen for hazing, sometimes robbing or beating them. One student noted that freshmen are particularly at risk *because* they are not yet affiliated with a gang and therefore do not enjoy protection from other gang members. Another student, a girl in the 11th grade, explained why freshmen students join gangs:

> Well the freshmen are getting recruited more than upperclassmen, because the upperclassmen don't really care about that now. They just want to get out of high school and finish high school and get the diploma. But the freshmen, they're like "oh I got four years. It's better if I join with them (gangs), because if I get in a fight they are going to back me up."

The group interviews also revealed that violent incidents did not occur at random locations, but tended to happen in specific areas of the school. The students identified a section of the third

floor corridor as a hotspot. A student gang known as the Third Floor Mafia prowled this area and often assaulted other students there.

Students also shared their insights as to how weapons were brought into Park West. Despite the school's metal detectors, knives, box cutters and other weapons were still regularly smuggled in. Citizens Committee staff learned during an interview with a Bloods gang member that night school students did not pass through the metal detectors. Some of these students were able to get weapons into the school when they arrived for night classes and hide them inside the building.

This information proved valuable to the school's principal and head of school safety, and they acted to address these specific problems immediately, assigning additional school safety agents to patrol the third floor corridor and requiring evening students to pass through metal detectors.

Recruiting Students, Teachers, Parents and School Safety Agents to Develop Safety Projects

Having identified some of Park West's safety problems, the Collaborative entered its second phase—creating teams of participant groups. Once formed, these groups—made up of students, parents, teachers, and school safety agents—would work together to resolve the school's safety problems. They would also develop six school safety projects.

Getting the Word Out. During the spring 2000 semester the Citizens Committee coordinator distributed flyers to teachers announcing two upcoming problem-solving workshops. These workshops were intended for participants interested in working on the project, and were to be held after school. The coordinator also distributed flyers about the project's Youth Leadership Institute, an afterschool group designed to teach students and teachers problem-solving and leadership skills. None of the potential participants attended either of the two workshops and only a few students and teachers took part in the leadership meetings. The students later told the Citizens Committee coordinator that their teachers never distributed the flyers and suggested that the project's coordinator directly hand out future announcements.

Securing Funds and Paying for Participation. The coordinator also learned that teachers did not attend the workshops because the project's funding was not yet available, meaning they would not be paid for their overtime work, contrary to what they had been told. The Collaborative had also told students they would be paid stipends for participating, but it was unable to pay either of these groups in the spring 2000 semester and the teachers and students who were interested declined to take part. Because of these problems, the Citizens Committee decided to postpone the workshops and the Youth Leadership Institute until the next school year.

Recruiting Participants in a Commuter School. The Collaborative received its complete funding the following school year (fall 2000), but this resolved only part of the recruitment problem. Park West, like many city high schools, is not a zoned school; its students are scattered throughout the

five boroughs, often far away. The school offers few afterschool activities and lacks an afterschool tradition. Consequently, students were reluctant to attend the project's 4:00 PM workshops.

Recruiting students' parents to participate in the workshops proved to be even more challenging. To participate parents would have to travel to Park West to attend the late afternoon workshops. Like their children, parents resided outside of the school's neighborhood, so participating would require making a lengthy and inconvenient commute to the school. Also, presumably many of these parents worked and had childcare obligations that prevented them from attending. One teacher speculated that the very fact that the school and its vicinity are considered unsafe might have dissuaded some parents from taking part in the workshops.

These problems were not unique to the Collaborative. During one of the study's group interviews teachers said that they were frustrated by the low parent turnout during parent-teacher meetings. The school's Parent Teacher Association also has few active parents, and unlike many other high school PTAs, it is uninvolved in most school issues.

While a few parents attended the initial workshops, they dropped out soon afterwards. In fact, parents were the only group that did not solicit a micro-grant from the Citizens Committee to develop a safety project and they were not participants in the Collaborative.

Making Use of Existing Structures and Staff

With the principal's cooperation, the project was able to improve its recruitment of teachers and students during its second year. It accomplished this in three ways. First, it changed the workshop schedule to accommodate the participants it needed to recruit. The meetings for the Youth Leadership Institute were scheduled during school hours and held as a class, making them more accessible for students and teachers who wanted to participate. Second, the project appointed a school-based staff person as the chief student and teacher recruiter. The Citizens Committee designated the school's Coordinator of Student Activities (COSA), a teacher who was in charge of existing student clubs. This person already worked with students who participated in extracurricular clubs and so could identify students and other teachers who might want to work on the project. Finally, the Assistant Principal was designated as the chief contact person between the Citizens Committee and Park West, providing the project with the on-site logistical coordination the project needed but lacked the year before.

These were effective changes. Assigning the COSA to recruit participants and the Assistant Principal as the key contact person were more effective methods of organizing the workshops than relying solely on the project's part-time coordinator. That person was not based at the school and had limited time to develop contacts. The indirect recruitment strategy the project used during its first year—distributing flyers to teachers, who would then presumably hand them out to students, who in turn would give them to their parents—proved ineffective. By contrast, the COSA already knew a pool of students and teachers who had participated in extracurricular activities that the project could directly draw from.

The Collaborative was planned as a one year project—it was to identify specific safety problems in the fall 1999 semester and implement safety projects during spring 2000. Because of the problems the program encountered, the project was extended by one academic year, through June 2001. The Citizens Committee used the remainder of the spring 2000 semester to hold three events to generate positive publicity about the school. In March it hosted Fleet Youth Entrepreneur Day, an awards ceremony for young people who had started their own businesses, including one student from Park West. Next, it hosted a student assembly for Miss Teen U.S.A., who spoke about drug use, peer pressure and community service. Finally, in June it held "Safe Night Party," an end of the school year celebration for students that was publicized as being "drug, alcohol, and conflict free."

Six Collaborative Projects

The students, teachers and school safety agents who participated in the Youth Leadership Institute developed six projects that they implemented throughout the spring 2001 semester. The Citizens Committee provided $1,500 grants to each of these projects and required that they each be made up of at least two groups of participants (teachers and students, for example). It also required that the grant recipients participate in a two-day training session at the school, facilitated by a Citizens Committee staff person. The training workshops taught the grant recipients how to effectively work with their partners and how to develop and implement a project.

The groups developed a diverse set of projects, ranging widely in their duration and approach to addressing school safety. The Body Smart program, for example, was a weight lifting class in which students and school safety agents exercised together that ran for one semester, while the Cultural Festival was a student diversity celebration that spanned one week. The projects' goals were broadly and ambitiously defined, ranging from reducing gang violence to decreasing drug use to providing students with a "safer way of thinking and acting." Their goals shared common elements—reducing gang involvement, reducing freshman exposure to violence, improving racial and ethnic relations between students (often linked to gangs), and providing afterschool activities as an alternative to delinquency.

The number of students who participated in the projects ranged from fifteen to forty. While the Collaborative's planners did not project how many students would participate, these numbers seem reasonable, considering the relatively small size of the projects and their modest funding.

The following table summarizes the six projects, their main goals, how many students participated and who the participants were.

Table 2-1 Collaborative Projects

Project Name	Participants	Project Goals	Project Summary	How often the participants met*	Number of student participants
Body Smart Program	School safety agents, students	Physical fitness; improved interactions between students and SSAs; exposure to student peers of different ethnic and racial groups.	Weightlifting class for students and school safety agents.	Four times per week.	30 students participated in weightlifting class.
Cultural Festival Program	COSA, students	Improved ethnic and racial tolerance.	Diversity celebration.	Festival ran for five days.	35 students organized event.
Peer Mediation /Big Buddy Program	Students, teachers	Reduce student problems with schoolwork, teachers and parents.	Mentoring program run by juniors, seniors, teachers & counselors for freshman students.	One day per week.	10 students worked as mentors.
Students for Peace Program	Students, teachers	Reduce student loitering in hallways, class disruption and assaults on students.	Student- and teacher-run newsletter that promoted school safety.	Produced one newsletter.	15 students helped produce newsletter.
Valley's Violence Reduction Program	Harlem-based youth organization, students, school safety agents	Reduce student violence.	Workshops on conflict resolution and mediation skills.	One day per week.	15 students attended workshops.
Victory House Freshman Group	Teachers, students, counselors, COSA	Improve student academic performance and classroom behavior	"Behavior management program" for freshmen. Students who improved their academic performance or classroom behavior were rewarded with acknow-ledgements during student assemblies and with field trips.	One day per week.	40 students were acknow-ledged.

* All six projects were implemented during the spring 2001 semester.

Changes in School Safety

In this section we examine changes in safety at Park West during the project's two years. We examined these changes in two ways. First, we analyzed New York City Division of School Safety incident data for the 1999-2000 and 2000-2001 school years. These data contain information on the number and types of incidents that occurred at the school. Next, we surveyed 150 juniors and seniors about how they thought safety had changed over the past year in a number of areas, including the threat of gangs, the prevalence of weapons and the quality of their communications with school safety agents, teachers and their peers.

School Safety Incidents

To assess changes in safety at Park West we compared data for the project's two school years. As noted earlier, these are incidents that were reported to the Division of School Safety by the school's safety agents and are therefore often the school's most serious incidents or those involving possessions of weapons or drugs. Less serious incidents that may result in a school taking disciplinary action, such as a student getting detention for disruptive behavior in class, are not included in the data.

Seven types of incidents accounted for almost ninety percent of all the incidents during this period; most were weapons or drugs possessions. The most common incidents were possession of a dangerous instrument (24%), possession of marijuana (15%), harassment (14%), possession of a box cutter (11%), assault (10%), petit larceny (7%), and disorderly conduct (5%).[17] While possessions of box cutters and other dangerous instruments were common, incidents involving guns were rare—only one firearm was confiscated during these two years.

Overall, school safety incidents at Park West declined by 11 percent between the project's first and second years, from 117 incidents to 104. Citywide, the number of incidents committed at high schools increased by almost 4 percent during this period. Park West's disorderly conduct incidents declined from nine incidents the first year to only one the second year. Harassment incidents also dropped sharply, from 21 incidents to 9 during this period. Both declines were statistically significant (p≤.05).

Accompanying these improvements, however, was an increase in certain types of incidents. Most notably, possession of marijuana incidents almost doubled, from 12 incidents the first year to 20 the second. Robbery incidents were also more common the second year, increasing from two incidents in the first year to six during the second year. None of these increases were statistically significant.

Figures 3-1 and 3-2 show changes in the most common types of safety incidents at Park West during the project's two years. Table 3-1, calculated from statistics provided by the NYPD School Safety Division, compares changes in the percentage of incidents at Park West with changes at high schools citywide during this period.

---

[17] Incidents classified as "possession of a dangerous weapon" were usually for possessions of knives or razors.

Figure 3-1

Figure 3-2

Change in Possession Incidents

Number of Incidents

- □ Possession of Box Cutter
- ■ Possession of Marijuana
- □ Possession of Dangerous nstrument

Year 1   Year 2

Change in Incidents Between Students

ber of Incidents

- ■ Petit Larceny
- □ Robbery
- □ Disorderly Conduct
- ■ Harassment
- □ Assault
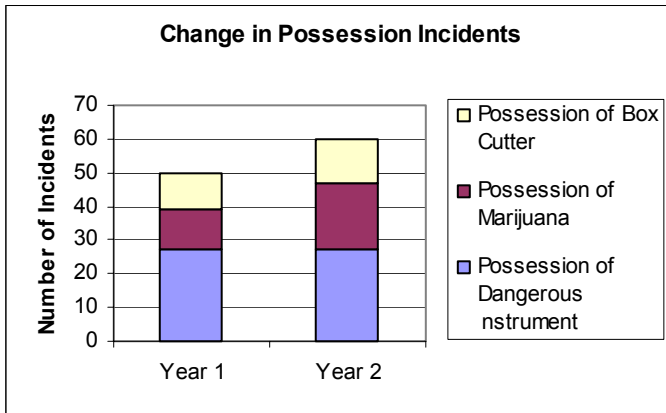
Year 1   Year 2
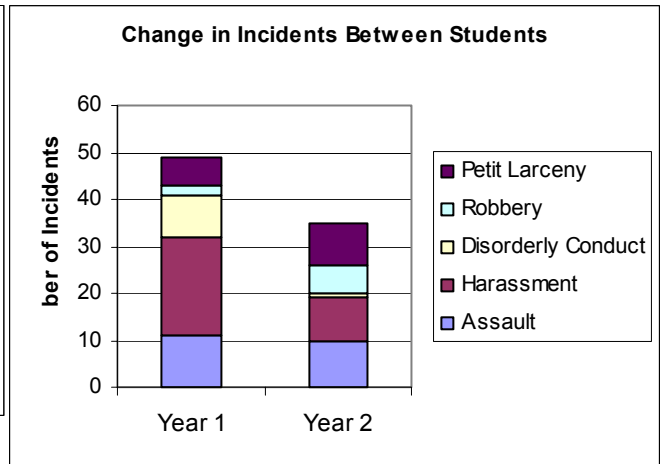
Table 3-1. Changes in Safety Incidents at Park West and Citywide

Category	City HS Year 1	City HS Year 2	*Change*	Park West Year 1	Park West Year 2	*Change*
Assault	9%	8%	*-1%*	9%	10%	*+1%*
Robbery	3	3%	*0%*	2%	6%	*+4%*
Weapons Possessions	28	27%	*-1%*			
Petit Larceny	4%	4%	*0*	5%	9%	*+4%*
Disorderly Conduct	14%	16%	*+2%*	8%	1%	*-7%*
Harassment	15%	17%	*+2%*	18%	9%	*-9%*
Marijuana	7%	8%	*+1%*	10%	19%	*+9%*
Total number of incidents	6141	6366	*+3.66%*	117	104	*-11.1%*
Number of students*	302,686	301,114	--	2208	2200* *	--

* The number of students enrolled at Park West and in high schools citywide changed by less than one percent during this period.

**Based on estimate provided by Park West High School.

We also categorized the incidents by type, and compared incidents that involved possession of weapons or drugs with those that involved conflicts between students. The former category includes possession of a dangerous instrument, weapon, box cutter, alcohol or drugs, and this contraband was almost always found on students during scanning at the school's metal detector. Conflicts between students were assault, robbery, harassment, disorderly conduct, gang assault and sexual abuse. Combined, these two categories accounted for almost 85% of all incidents during the two years. Classifying incidents into these two groups is useful in understanding the nature of safety incidents, their potential for student-on-student violence, and how changes in their prevalence may have affected student perceptions of school safety.

As Figure 3-3 indicates, incidents between students declined between years one and two, from 43 incidents to 28. At the same time, possession incidents increased, from 55 incidents to 60. While none of these changes are statistically significant, they show that the overall reduction in safety incidents is attributable to a decline in student-on-student conflicts.

Figure 3-3

**Changes in Possession and
Incidents Between Students**
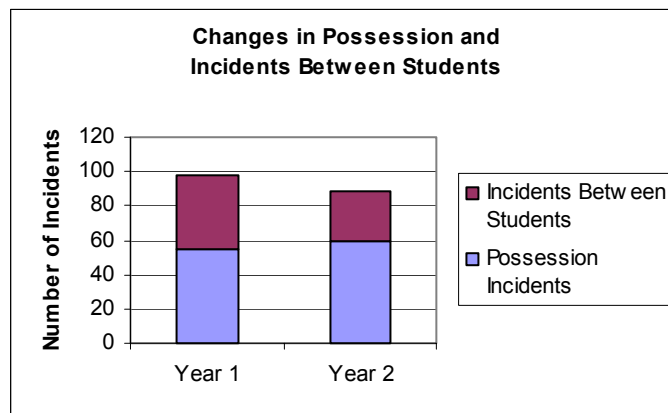
Changes in Student Perceptions of Safety

How students perceive their school's safety is an important measure of a school's safety climate. If students feel unsafe at school, hold unfavorable views of school safety agents and teachers and are preoccupied with avoiding gangs instead of arriving at class on time, it stands to reason that their grades will decline, that some will transfer to other schools and that others will drop out altogether. Asking students how they perceive their school's safety environment also allows us to contrast their views with the number and types of incidents committed. The total number of incidents may decline from one school year to the next, but if incidents that make students feel threatened increase, students might feel less safe than the year before. Conversely, more incidents may occur one year than during the previous year and yet students may feel that the school is safer.

To assess how safe Park West students felt at school we asked the school's juniors and seniors to compare safety in their current school year with safety the previous year. We designed

a ten-question survey that measures change in two areas that contribute to a student's experience of school safety— perceptions of safety, and perceptions of the quality of their relationships with teachers and school safety agents as well as their peers. Specifically, the first five questions asked students how safe they felt the school was overall and how safe they felt personally, how prevalent they perceived gangs and weapons to be, and how safe they felt in the school's perimeter compared to the previous school year. The next five questions asked them to rank the quality of their communications with school safety agents, teachers and their peers compared to the year before.

We distributed the survey directly to 82 juniors and 68 seniors during six Global Studies classes towards the end of the 2000-2001 school year. We chose Global Studies because all of the school's juniors and seniors were required to take the course and because few sophomores and no freshmen were in these classes. We did not survey freshmen because most of them could not compare the school with the previous year. We also eliminated sophomores from our sample because most of them take classes with freshman students, increasing the chances that we would inadvertently survey freshmen.

The results of our survey must therefore be interpreted within the limitations of our student sample. Because we surveyed juniors and seniors, while freshmen and sophomores are the most likely to be involved in safety incidents, we cannot conclude that the perceptions of the older students are representative of the school's student body. However, the improved student perceptions of safety, discussed below, are consistent with the decline in incidents reported to the Division of School Safety.

School Safety. Almost two-thirds of the students we interviewed considered Park West to be a safer school *overall* than during the previous year, while only three percent thought that it was less safe. When asked how safe they *personally* felt at school, half reported feeling safer while almost half said they felt just as safe as the year before; only three percent felt less safe. Seventy percent of the students considered weapons and gang problems to be less prevalent than during the previous year, while only three percent considered weapons more prevalent and ten percent considered gangs more common. Finally, almost half felt safer in the school's perimeter than during the previous year while almost half felt equally safe; only four percent felt less safe around the school. In fact, students were significantly more likely to report safer versus less safe perceptions in all five of the school safety questions (p≤.000).

The following graphs show the changes in student perceptions of school safety. Their responses are also shown by their gender and class year.[18]

---

[18] Percentages less than two percent are not shown.

Figure 3-4

Overall School Safety Compared to Last Year

	Much Safer	Somewhat Safer	Same	Somewhat Less Safe	Much Less Safe
All Students	20%	43%	34%	3%	
Seniors	25%	44%	27%	4%	
Juniors	15%	44%	39%	2%	
Boys	18%	46%	33%	3%	
Girls	23%	39%	34%	4%	

n=150

Figure 3-5

How Safe Do You Feel at School Compared to Last Year

	Much Safer	Somewhat Safer	Same	Somewhat Less Safe	Much Less Safe
All Students	14%	36%	47%	3%	
Seniors	19%	32%	46%	3%	
Juniors	7%	40%	49%	2%	
Boys	11%	42%	43%	3%	
Girls	18%	25%	54%	2%	

n=150

Figure 3-6

Prevalence of Weapons Compared to Last Year

	Much Less	Somewhat Less	About the Same	Somewhat more	Much More
All Students	47%	23%	25%		3%
Seniors	47%	24%	25%		3%
Juniors	48%	22%	25%		3%
Boys	41%	27%	27%		4%
Girls	56%	18%	22%		2%

n=150

Figure 3-7

Number of Gang Problems Compared to Last Year

	Much Less	Somewhat Less	About the Same	Somewhat More	Many More
All Students	25%	44%	21%	6%	4%
Seniors	24%	43%	25%	4%	4%
Juniors	28%	43%	17%	7%	4%
Boys	24%	45%	25%	4%	3%
Girls	29%	42%	16%	7%	6%

n=150

Figure 3-8

How Safe Do You Feel Immediately Outside School Compared to Last Year

	Much Safer	Somewhat Safer	About the Same	Somewhat Less Safe	Much Less Safe
All Students	16%	31%	49%	4%	
Seniors	18%	32%	44%	4%	2%
Juniors	14%	31%	52%	4%	
Boys	14%	31%	52%	3%	
Girls	18%	31%	43%	6%	2%

n=150
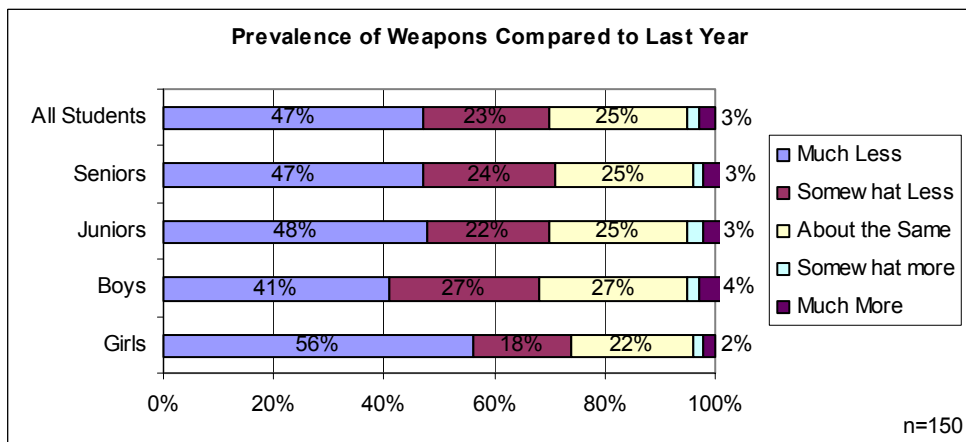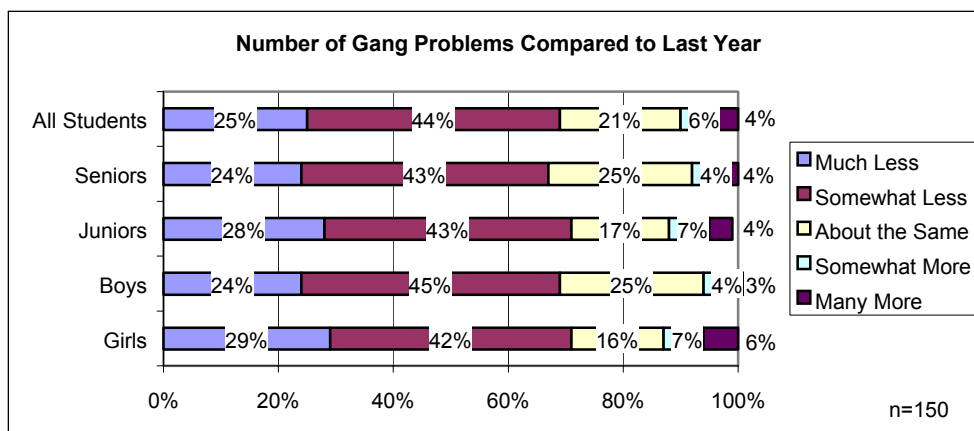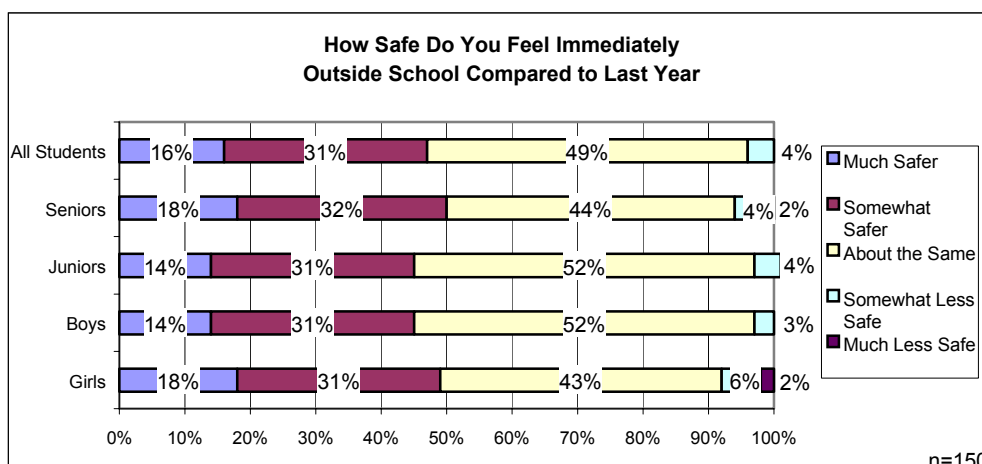
Communications with Safety Agents, Teachers and Peers. Students also reported improved or unchanged communications with their peers and with teachers and safety agents; few reported that communications were worse. Sixty percent of students held more favorable views of school safety agents than during the previous school year and an equal proportion said that their communications with SSAs had improved during this period. Only ten percent reported less favorable views of safety agents, and four percent said their communication with safety agents had gotten worse. Also, forty percent of students reported improved communications with other students, while almost half said these communications were unchanged; 12 percent considered them worse. Finally, half the students said that their communications with teachers were unchanged compared to the previous year, while a third said that they were better. Only 15 percent said communications with teachers had deteriorated.

Students were significantly more likely to report better, rather than worse perceptions of school safety agents, students and teachers in all four of these questions (p≤.000). When students

were asked to compare the number of interactions they had with safety agents this year with those of the previous year, about equal proportions considered that they had had more, less or the same number of interactions.

In all, students were more likely to report improved versus *less favorable* perceptions of safety and communications in nine of the ten survey questions. Their perceptions of improved versus *unchanged* school safety and communications, however, were not statistically significant in any of the questions.

One of the six projects the participants developed—the school safety agent-run Body Smart weight training class—offers some clues as to what may have contributed to the improved student perceptions of school safety agents. The Body Smart project, created by the school's head of school safety in collaboration with students, used improving physical fitness as a reason to bring these two groups together in a non-adversarial setting and improve their communications with one another. According to one school safety agent who has worked at Park West for four years—two before the transfer of school safety to the Police Department and two after—the project helped improve relations with students:

> And also there was the extra benefit that you have these students to get a more personal relationship with them rather than seeing them in the hallway. You get to talk to them off the job and they let you know if something else is happening and you know, if it needs a little extra. They know if something is happening at school and they might inform you about it. So it had its benefits besides just getting into shape. Like getting a bond more with the students in the school[...] You build that trust issue, the trust between you know, we are not always going to get them in trouble. Build that trust. That we're regular people also, trying to get into shape, you know, and seeing us more on the human level with them.

The following graphs show the results of the second half of our student survey and how these students responded based on their gender and class year.
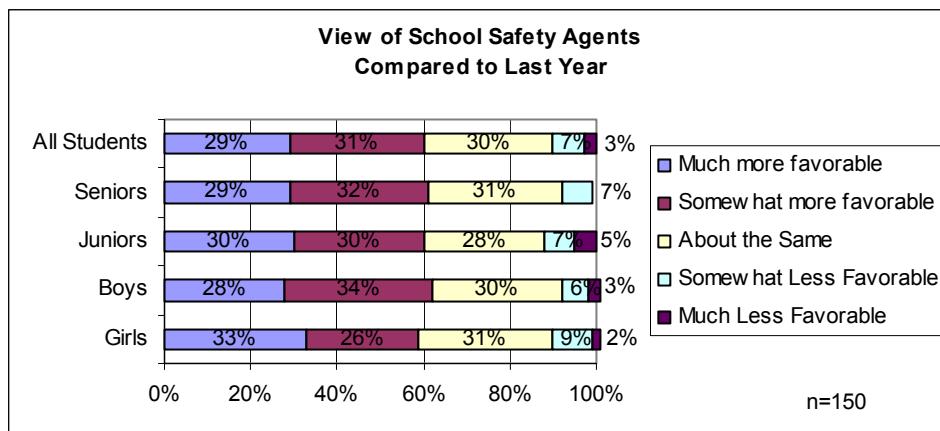
Figure 3-9

Figure 3-10

**Communications With School Safety Agents
Compared to Last Year**

	Much better	Somewhat better	About the same	Somewhat worse
All Students	31%	29%	36%	4%
Seniors	35%	32%	29%	3%
Juniors	30%	24%	41%	5%
Boys	27%	34%	35%	3%
Girls	39%	20%	36%	5%

Legend:
- Much better
- Somewhat better
- About the same
- Somewhat worse
- Much worse

n=150

Figure 3-11

**Number of Interactions With
School Safety Agents
Compared to Last Year**

	More Interactions	About the Same	Fewer Interactions
All Students	38%	35%	27%
Seniors	37%	38%	25%
Juniors	40%	32%	28%
Boys	33%	37%	30%
Girls	48%	29%	23%

n=150

Figure 3-12

**Communications With Teachers
Compared to Last Year**

	Much better	Somewhat better	About the Same	Somewhat worse	Much worse
All Students	13%	21%	51%	8%	7%
Seniors	9%	25%	49%	12%	6%
Juniors	17%	17%	52%	6%	7%
Boys	14%	19%	55%	6%	6%
Girls	11%	25%	45%	13%	7%

n=150

Figure 3-13

**Communications With Students
Compared to Last Year**

	Much better	Somewhat better	About the same	Somewhat worse	Much worse
All Students	12%	28%	48%	9%	3%
Seniors	12%	28%	50%	7%	3%
Juniors	14%	27%	47%	10%	3%
Boys	13%	30%	48%		8%
Girls	11%	23%	50%	11%	5%

n=150
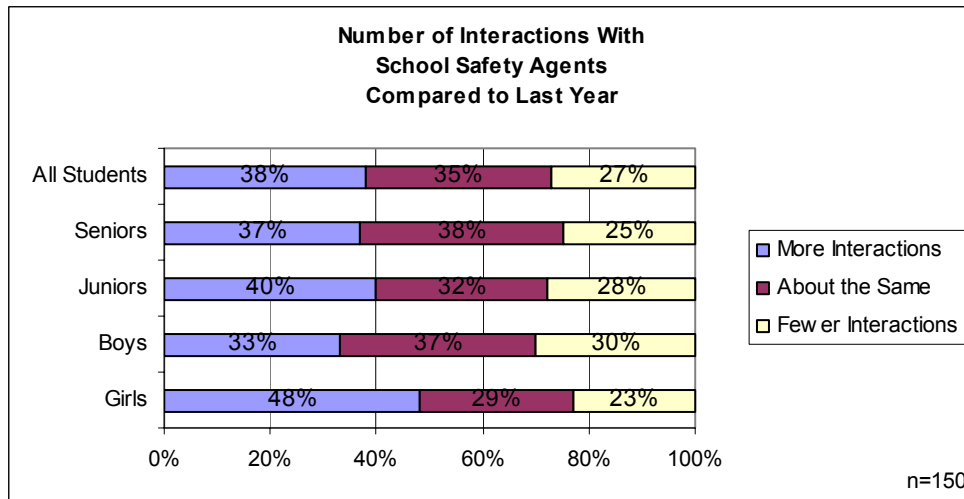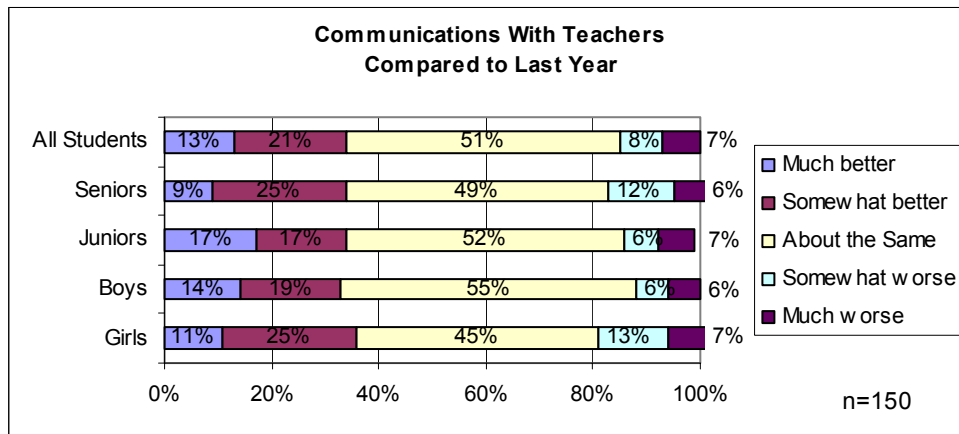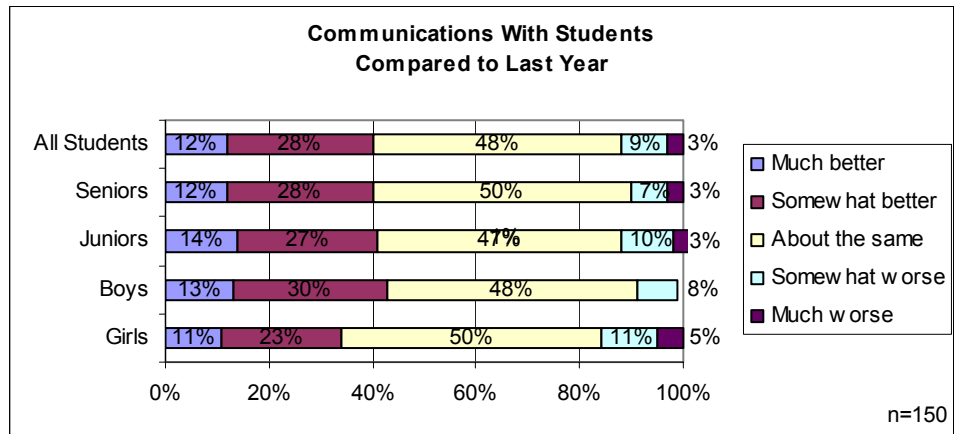
Conclusions and Implications for Similar Projects

Park West was a safer high school at the end of the project's second year than the year before and its older students felt more secure. Several concurrent activities at the school, including the projects launched by the Collaborative, likely contributed to this improvement. For example, the changes the principal made—instituting a separate class schedule for freshmen during the project's second year, thereby minimizing their contacts with older students, and holding freshmen classes on separate floors from those of upperclassmen—while unrelated to the project, likely had an impact. While we therefore cannot attribute this safer school climate directly or solely to the project, its experience of implementing a collaborative safety model despite various obstacles is an important contribution to understanding how similar projects can also use this model.

Collaborative problem solving between school groups can be an effective way of improving school safety. But building a successful project that uses this model requires making several important decisions during the project's planning, such as what type of school to select, how to identify safety problems, how to recruit participants and who should recruit them. The experience of the Park West Collaborative Project Solving Initiative offers some answers to these questions.

Selecting the School. Recruiting participants to work on the Collaborative proved more difficult than the project's planners had expected, mostly because Park West is not a zoned, or neighborhood, school. This fact reduced the number of students who were active in the project and eliminated parents from the Collaborative altogether. Because parents have an important stake in ensuring the safety of their children while at school and are potentially one of the more active groups in a safety project, this was a significant loss. Non-neighborhood schools, however, may still benefit from collaborative safety models. While project planners should expect that recruiting parents and students will be difficult, knowing that a school is a "commuter school" at the project's outset can give a project's staff time to develop a specialized and more intensive recruitment strategy. For example, staff can call parents directly at home, they can mail them information describing the project, and perhaps even budget for their transportation to the school to attend project workshops.

Identifying Safety Problems by Talking to Students. One of the project's most important contributions occurred soon after the project began. The project's scanning stage, when it identified specific safety problems through interviews with students, teachers and staff, proved a valuable way of solving short-term problems. Talking with students proved particularly instructive. This common sense approach—asking students what they thought safety problems were, where incidents happened and specific questions like how weapons were smuggled into school—gave the school's safety agents and its principal information they could act on immediately. The principal and safety agents responded by assigning more officers to a

particularly dangerous school corridor and by scanning evening students with the school's metal detectors. Also, by speaking to students, the project and school administrators learned that despite the school's history of gang problems, students perceived gangs as less of a threat than before—a valuable insight that only students could give them.

Recruiting Participants—How and Who. The Collaborative was unable to recruit enough participants during its first year, partly due to problems with its funding but also because of the indirect way it sought to engage students, teachers and parents. By the second year, however, the project had developed a more effective strategy. Rather than relying on teachers to distribute program literature to students, the project's coordinator distributed information directly. With the school's cooperation, the Collaborative also changed the workshop meeting time to earlier in the day, making workshops more convenient for students to attend. More important, the Collaborative realized that the project's part-time coordinator, a Citizens Committee consultant, did not have enough time to identify student and teacher participants. The school's Coordinator of Student Activities (COSA), however, already knew a pool of students and teachers interested in extracurricular work. Other schools have a COSA or its equivalent. This person can be a valuable project member, particularly in schools that do not have strong afterschool traditions.

Planning for Continuation. A final point worth bringing out is the need to plan for short-term school safety initiatives to continue in some way. If limited funding means projects can run only temporarily, project planners and project participants need to think about ways to build on the time and effort they have invested in identifying safety problems and planning and running projects. While every project might not be able to continue once funding runs out, there may be aspects of projects that can continue at little or no cost. As Park West's experience shows, simply convening students, teachers, and school safety agents periodically and asking for their input on safety issues can produce information that can make schools safer places.