

Teachers claim frequent physical attacks

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Two-thirds of teachers in the UK have been physically or verbally assaulted in the past year, with 17% threatened in incidents involving weapons, according to new research.

Almost all teachers (99%) said they had been verbally abused by their pupils in the past year, with 74% claiming it happened at least once every two or three weeks.

Researchers from University of Leicester spin-out company, Perpetuity, undertook a survey of over 300 teachers, supplemented with interviews with other educational experts.

The study showed that pupils verbally or physically assaulted more men (73%) than women (62%) in the last year. In the more extreme cases this took the form of being punched, tripped or kicked.

Of the teachers who had been victimised, 17% had been threatened with a weapon by a pupil on at least one occasion and 3% of them claimed the threat had been followed through with the use of a knife or a gun in school.

Over 20% of teachers had been verbally or physically assaulted by a parent or guardian, with 6% falling victim to an intruder in the school.

The majority of teachers (57%) reported that poor pupil behaviour interfered with their ability to do their jobs. More men (69%) than women (49%) argued that it affected their teaching.

Similarly, the majority of staff (51%) said levels of crime and indiscipline in classes interfered with pupils' ability to learn.

A third of teachers said they would change school because of violence. And men appeared to be more affected than women: 42% of them said they would consider leaving the profession, compared with 35% of women.

The report, funded by security company TAC UK, also probed teachers about pupils' experiences of bullying.

More than half of the teaching staff had reported incidents of pupils being bullied, either by pushing, shoving, grabbing and slapping (68%), or kicking or tripping (65%), although the researchers said there were likely to be more incidents than those reported.

Nevertheless, 79% of teachers said they felt safe in school. But 26% of women teachers avoided certain areas compared to 18% of men.

Most teachers in the sample (83%) said their schools subscribed to anti-bullying programmes, carried out staff surveillance at break and lunch times (76%) or carried out other strategies to address child indiscipline (71%).

The majority of the schools surveyed had isolation or exclusion units. Nevertheless, less than half the teachers surveyed said their schools recorded incidents of crime and disorder.

Martin Gill, the criminology professor who carried out the survey, said this was the most shocking aspect. "I find it pretty amazing that 52% of teachers said their schools didn't record all incidents. If

schools aren't recording that information then there's nothing to base their strategy on.

"You need to build up an understanding of what any problems are or you put in place a strategy - CCTV or whatever - that doesn't really solve the problem," he told EducationGuardian.co.uk.

"The report makes interesting, if not disturbing reading," Professor Gill said. "There was an overall perception of safety and security among most staff, but some feel unsafe and most teachers were victimised in some way, some seriously. As they stated in their responses, this can impact negatively on the whole learning experience."

There were mixed feelings among teaching staff about placing guards or police in schools. Almost 40% argued that guarding would be effective but 30% said the opposite and a further 30% were undecided.

Derek Duffill, managing director of TAC UK, said: "There are lessons to be learned from this research in terms of schools reviewing their security strategies and sending the right messages to pupils and parents that violence and intimidation will not be tolerated."

Mary Bousted, general secretary of the Association of Teachers and Lecturers, said the findings chimed with ATL's own research that found poor pupil behaviour continues to be a rampant problem in today's schools.

"In fact 99% of ATL members who responded to a survey have dealt with disruptive pupils in class and over a third have faced physical aggression. This behaviour has made over half of respondents think of leaving teaching," she said.

"Teachers are there to teach not face a barrage of abuse or violence. ATL calls on schools to have codes of conduct with clear sanctions against poor pupil behaviour as required from September."

Schools suspensions rise while expulsions fall

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Schools are increasingly turning to suspensions rather than permanent exclusion to deal with bad behaviour, according to new official statistics.

The number of children permanently excluded from school for serious misbehaviour has fallen this year, while the number of fixed term exclusions rose.

Pupil exclusions dropped by nearly 3% from 9,440 to 9,170 in all state primary, secondary and special schools between 2005-06; 25% less than eight years ago. Conversely, the number of suspensions in secondary schools rose by 4% to 343,840 in 2006.

The government says this means more schools are using them as a way of clamping down on lower-level misdemeanours before they escalate to permanent exclusions.

The schools minister, Jim Knight, said the figures reflected the 'hard line' schools were taking on discipline and that new powers introduced earlier this year would help to deliver further improvements in behaviour.

"The rise in fixed period exclusions reflects the tough approach schools are taking to address bad behaviour. They are using the short, sharp shock of a suspension to nip problem behaviour in the bud, and this is helping to stop this escalating to the point where permanent exclusion becomes necessary."

According to the figures, boys were four times more likely to be permanently expelled than girls - 80% of the total over the last five years. Pupils aged 12 to 14 were most likely to be excluded.

Boys were also more likely to be suspended from state schools. The rate in 2005-06 for boys was almost three times higher than that for girls - 72% of all the suspensions from state secondary schools.

They are more likely to be excluded both permanently and for a fixed period at a younger age than girls, with very few girls being excluded during the primary years.

Overall, the most common point for both boys and girls to be excluded is at ages 13 and 14 (years 9 and 10). Over half of all permanent exclusions were of pupils of this age.

Most fixed term exclusions lasted for no more than a couple of days: 27% were for just one day, 71% were for three days or less and 89% lasted five days or less.

The most common reasons for permanent exclusions were persistent disruptive behaviour (2,370 or 30% of all permanent exclusions - a drop of 150 from 2004-05), physical assaults against a pupil (1,260 or 16% - a drop of 240) and verbal abuse or threatening behaviour against an adult (900 or 11% - a drop of 80).

The number of appeals against exclusions also dropped, by 2.8% from 1,090 to 1,060, but the proportion of appeals won by excluded pupils rose 9% from 220 to 240, suggesting that fewer but stronger claims were being made.

Overall, there were 130 successful appeals to reinstate pupils nationally, a total of 1.4% of all permanent exclusions.

The schools minister said that the government wanted to build on the hard line on discipline. "A teacher's authority must be absolute, and if young people do badly misbehave, we fully support schools taking the tough decision to exclude."

Parents should play a bigger role too, he said. From September parents will be forced, under pain of a £50 fine, to ensure excluded pupils are kept indoors for the first five days of their exclusion.

Dr Mary Bousted, general secretary of the Association of Teachers and Lecturers, said: "Unfortunately teachers and other school staff have to deal on a daily basis with unacceptable pupil behaviour. Our March survey revealed 99% of teachers have dealt with disruptive pupils, and over a third faced physical aggression in class.

"And occasionally schools need to exclude or expel pupils to safeguard their staff and other pupils. But pupil exclusions are the last resort, so we are concerned to hear about the rise in cases of schools being forced to take back pupils who have been excluded. Regrettably these instances are not that rare and put a huge strain put on the teaching and support staff and schools.

"We hope the new disciplinary measures being brought in by the DfES this September - giving teachers the legal power to enforce their school's code of conduct, and requiring schools to have a clear written discipline policy - will help school staff improve discipline in schools and have a knock-on impact on pupil exclusions."