

North · CBC Investigates

## Nunavut schools had 1,000 violent incidents last year, CBC investigation reveals

Investigation marks first time the government of Nunavut has compiled statistics on school violence

[Nick Murray](#) · CBC News · Posted: Feb 22, 2021 5:00 AM CT | Last Updated: February 22



Students board a school bus at the Nakasuk Elementary School in Iqaluit in a March 30, 2009, file photo. In the 2019-2020 school year, there were more than 1,000 violent incidents in Nunavut's schools. (Nathan

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***This is Part 1 of a three-part series on violence in Nunavut's schools.***

In the 2019-2020 school year, there were more than 1,000 violent incidents in Nunavut's schools.

Of those, 971 were student-on-student incidents, 110 were incidents where students were alleged to have assaulted staff, and 12 were where staff were alleged to have assaulted students.

Schools also issued 491 suspensions, totalling more than 1,400 missed days of school for Nunavut students.

CBC News obtained the statistics from the pandemic-shortened school year through multiple access to information requests over the last 18 months. The undertaking marks the first time the government of Nunavut has compiled such statistics on school violence, despite the Department of Education's claims that such incidents are tracked and reported.

**“This signals a very serious, very serious concern.”**

*- Jane Bates, Nunavut's Representative of Children and Youth*

However the numbers don't show the true scope of the problem of violence in Nunavut's schools, as there is no consistency in how incidents are reported and logged. Other schools' datasets are also incomplete.

While there is no national average to compare Nunavut's numbers against, the territory's representative for children and youth, Jane Bates, said when you consider Nunavut's 60 per cent absenteeism rate, the numbers are "exceedingly high."

"I was shocked. The numbers are staggering. They are quite staggering," said Bates. "This signals a very serious, very serious concern."

"Something needs to change," said John Fanjoy, the president of Nunavut's Teachers Association.

"When we calculated the numbers and we looked at the amount of days that students are in school, we're talking about numerous violent incidents happening across the territory in our schools each and every day."

## One teacher fired last year over student assault

While the numbers give a better sense of the scope of the problem than the anecdotal data officials have been relying on, it provides only a baseline for how truly widespread school violence is.

The data relies on the institutional memory, and interpretation, of each school's principals. As such, data from three schools is incomplete because those schools had turnover in their administration before the requests could be completed.

Furthermore, it's unclear whether each instance of violence is an alleged incident, or an incident that actually occurred.

For example, the statistics indicate there were 12 incidents of staff-on-student violence. However, according to Fanjoy, the teachers' union president, 11 of those were not severe enough to warrant terminations — like a teacher breaking up a fight, or placing a hand on a student's shoulder.

Fanjoy said one incident of those 12 was a case where a staff member physically assaulted a student, and the staff member was fired.

There was also one reported incident of staff-on-student sexual harassment/assault. Neither the NTA, nor the Department of Education would elaborate on it.

## 'The system is broken'

In her 2019-2020 annual report, Bates criticized the government on its lack of data tracking in several areas, including school violence.

"You can't fix what you don't know. You can't design services unless you know what you're dealing with," Bates said in an interview.

In 2013, the NTA and the Department of Education formed a joint "anti-violence committee." One of the goals was to create a uniform violence-reporting mechanism. After a series of missed deadlines, Fanjoy says the system has been sent out to a contractor and should be available by the end of the school year.

"To solve the issue, you need the baseline data," Fanjoy said, noting up until now they've been relying on anecdotal data in emails, phone calls, and exit surveys from teachers leaving the profession.

"We're noticing one of the reasons why they're leaving the teaching profession in Nunavut is because of this stress of dealing with violent incidents at work. We need that data so we can better direct how to solve the problem."

Fanjoy also said the data is useful for the Department of Education to back up requests for budget increases to fix the problem. On this, Fanjoy said no new funding has specifically been directed at addressing the issue of violence, or in the government's "safe schools portfolio."

The territorial government's own 2020-2023 business plan doesn't have any budget increases forecasted beyond 2020 for school operations, which only speaks of "support[ing] the development of safe schools and communities."

"The system is broken because there is no system," Fanjoy said.

"I just think it's that they've failed to come up with any way that violent stats can be centrally compiled. So when [CBC] had this [access to information] request done, and they had to do it for the first time basically, I'm sure they were surprised when they tabulated the [stats] for the first time."

## How CBC obtained the numbers

CBC News initially placed an access to information request in May of 2019, seeking school violence statistics as far back as 2011-2012. The Department of Education's response, seven months later, indicated those records didn't exist and the government didn't compile such data — although some schools unofficially tracked incidents using the school's student information system, Maplewood.

Thus, any data available "would be inaccurate and not reportable," then-Deputy Minister Kathy Okpik wrote.

- [Nunavut government to track school violence with new tool](#)

In January 2020, CBC News placed a second request, this time asking for data from the first four months of that school year. To help fulfil the request, CBC News created a spreadsheet to record the data and asked that it be sent around to all of Nunavut's school principals to fill out.

The department completed the request in less than three months. By then, Nunavut's schools had been shut down because of the pandemic, so CBC News requested the spreadsheet be sent out again to canvass the remainder of the school year.

## **Doubting the government's claims on tracking**

In an interview with CBC News, Assistant Deputy Minister Sonia Osbourne maintained that the government does require mandatory reporting and tracking of violent incidents, and has data on it — assertions the Department made in 2019 when CBC News undertook a nationwide snapshot of school violence.

However, there are reasons to doubt the government's claims.

First, the department was unable to provide statistics for the first half of this school year, citing the impact of COVID-19 in schools.

Second, while the annual report from the territory's child and youth representative contains school violence statistics provided by the Department of Education, they are identical to the numbers CBC News obtained, and covered the same period as those in its access to information request — which, again, were compiled using a spreadsheet CBC News designed and provided for the purposes of the request.

Third, when CBC News pressed Osbourne in an interview on the significance of 1,000 cases in a single year, Osbourne was taken aback and mistook it for a Canada-wide statistic, and not Nunavut-specific. The department later said Osbourne wasn't privy to the numbers, citing the confidentiality of the access to information process — even though the department had evidently shared the information with the child and youth representative.

- [Long-time Inuk social worker says abuse is normalized in Nunavut households](#)
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Still, Osbourne emphasized the ongoing work with the NTA to create a uniform reporting mechanism, and mostly stuck to her speaking points that the government is committed to improving the system.

"If our students and staff are not safe, then as those schools want to attain all the academic outcomes, we recognize that the health and safety is really a top priority," Osbourne said, breaking from her talking points.

"[The numbers] deepen our commitment to that. We can't ignore it. It tells us this is definitely something we need to improve on."

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