

The World Today with Eleanor Hall

An hour of current affairs background and debate from Australia and the world every Monday to Friday, 12:10 pm, ABC Local Radio and Radio National.

School principals face high levels of violence and intimidation, study finds

Will Ockenden reported this story on Tuesday, July 23, 2013 12:18:00

ELEANOR HALL: Now to that shocking report on bullying in schools. Not schoolyard bullying, but bullying of teachers by parents.

Monash University researchers surveyed schools across the country in all sectors and found that more than a third of school principals had been verbally abused by angry parents, and that more than a quarter of them had been physically assaulted.

Principals say they're not surprised by the findings but that it is generally a small group of parents causing the problems.

Will Ockenden has our report.

WILL OCKENDEN: There's long been concern about bullying in schools, but it's never focused on parents threatening the school's principal.

Victorian Association of State Secondary Principals, Frank Sal, has been a principal for nearly two decades, and has personally faced violence.

FRANK SAL: Parents coming in and being significantly disturbed by what they believe is the right way that the school should be approaching that, and then very much swearing and cursing and then threatening physical violence - and on occasion, pushing and shoving as well.

WILL OCKENDEN: A study from Monash University has found significantly higher rates of violence towards principals than the general population.

It finds 38 per cent have reported threats of violence, compared with only 8 per cent of the general population who report intimidation.

For actual violence, 27 per cent of principals report having been attacked, comparing with the society average of about 4 per cent.

PHILIP RILEY: I had no idea the figures were going to be this high or this widespread.

WILL OCKENDEN: Dr Philip Riley wrote the study, which surveyed thousands of principals across the country.

PHILIP RILEY: What really surprised me was the level of violence, threats of violence and bullying in all three sectors.

The fact that it's showing up in the wealthy private schools as much as well not as much, but almost as much as poor government schools would say that socio-economic status is probably not that much of a factor. I think parents' anxieties over their children's futures is probably a much bigger factor.

WILL OCKENDEN: The situation is worst in the Northern Territory - the reasons why put down the remoteness of many of its schools. But the problem is far from unique to the NT.

PHILIP RILEY: The remote areas in every state is where a lot of the incidences are going on, but it's certainly true in the outer suburbs and the inner suburbs of Melbourne and Sydney, too.

WILL OCKENDEN: The report recommends that each state and territory create an independent task force to investigate violence in schools. Dr Philip Riley says the reasons for the violence is difficult to work out.

PHILIP RILEY: Principals are probably more in the front line for parent expectations about NAPLAN results, for instance. They're also much more anxious about the future of their children than they used to be; you know, we now hear about helicopter parents and, you know, lawnmower parents who are always moving away for their children. So there's a whole kind of cultural shift, and in that sense the principals in this study might really be the canary in the coalmine that's showing the difficulty in the whole way our society is going.

We're very interested in whether this violence is trending up, down, staying the same. You know, nobody's kept figures on this until this research, so we really don't know. The anecdotal evidence is it's increasing, but we need some more clear empirical data to confirm that.

WILL OCKENDEN: Frank Sal from the Victorian Association of State Secondary Principals says it's something many teachers and principals have experienced over the years.

FRANK SAL: The report certainly points to the stresses of the job, and violence and assaults is just one aspect of that. And I think when you talk to principals across the nation - not just in Victoria - and in all sectors you get principals talking about the sorts of roles that a small group of parents play in creating those sorts of situations in schools

WILL OCKENDEN: The report also recommends that state governments urgently address the issue and provide better training and help for principals to handle violent parents.

ELEANOR HALL: Will Ockenden reporting.

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