Chapter One
INTRODUCTION

This report synthesizes the results of a RAND assessment of the federal Safe and Drug-Free Schools and Communities Act (SDFSCA), the renewal of which Congress will consider this year. We analyze a proposal submitted by the Clinton administration for reform of the SDFSCA program, and we suggest additional steps that might be taken to improve the program. The Bush administration has also submitted an initial proposal to consolidate the SDFSCA program with the 21st Century Learning Centers program. This proposal places seemingly greater emphasis on safety and violence prevention and on after-school programs, but few details are yet available.

Over the past decade, violence in American schools has declined substantially and persistently to a level that, by many measures, makes schools safer than the other places in which children spend time. Children face a homicide risk of 0.45 per 100,000 person-years in school, compared with 20 per 100,000 person-years outside school (Sherman, 2001). Rates of violent injury, as reported by high school seniors, have fluctuated but have shown no clear trend over the past decade. Nonetheless, intense concern about schools’ ability to protect children has been generated by the tragic mass killings at a few schools, in particular, the incident at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado. Impressions formed by these incidents have also been exacerbated by evidence of high levels of routine violence against both pupils and teachers in and around many urban schools.

Drug use among high school students is also a cause of continuing concern. In 1986, 5 percent of high school seniors reported having
used marijuana daily in the previous 30 days. That proportion fell steadily through 1992 to 2 percent but then rose again sharply. In 1997, the rate of daily marijuana use among high school seniors reached 6 percent—experimentation with marijuana had again become normative behavior. Use of other drugs has also become more widespread, and some evidence suggests that children are beginning drug use at a younger age. The causes of the changes in drug use remain unknown. While it is clear that shifts in attitude have been the proximate cause of the change in prevalence (Johnston, O’Malley, and Bachman, 1998), there is little understanding of the reasons behind these shifts.

These impressions and trends have contributed to broad political support for the SDFSCA. The Act was passed in 1986 primarily to foster school-based efforts to prevent drug abuse, and funding has been provided for its objectives annually since then. In 1994, violence prevention was added to the Act’s stated purposes. Although there are numerous federal government programs aimed at solving problems of youth violence and drug abuse, the SDFSCA is unique in its focus on schools, where it is the principal resource for programs addressing safety, violence, and drug abuse.

The SDFSCA mandates disbursement of money primarily through grants to states, allocated according to population. State education departments receive 80 percent of the funds for disbursement to school districts (see Figure 1); 70 percent of that money is distributed on the basis of student enrollment, and the remaining 30 percent on the basis of need. The governor of each state can disburse the remaining 20 percent of the state’s allotment to other organizations that provide prevention activities, such as community organizations or programs serving students with special needs. The U.S. Department of Education (ED) also distributes some discretionary funds under the SDFSCA. These funds, which comprise from 5 to 20 percent of the total disbursed under the Act, are often used for demonstration programs, sometimes in collaboration with other federal agencies such as the Center for Mental Health Services or the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.

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1The information in this paragraph is drawn from Monitoring the Future, an annual survey of 8th, 10th, and 12th grade students (Johnston, O’Malley, and Bachman, annual).
Figure 1—Disbursement of SDFSCA Funds to States, FY 00

Schools use a great variety of methods for preventing drug use and preventing or controlling violence. Curricular offerings are the most common approach, but many schools also provide one-on-one counseling by professionals and peers, as well as recreational, enrichment, and leisure activities; many also set explicit norms and rules for behavior. In addition, schools invest in policing activities, including the use of metal detectors.

For many years, the SDFSCA program has been criticized widely on both structural and programmatic grounds. Critics charge that the program fails to target high-need communities and schools; provides minuscule levels of per-pupil support and local programs of insignificant size; shows little or no evidence of effectiveness in reducing drug use or violence; and embodies confusion of purposes among drug prevention, violence prevention, and school safety. In addition,

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2See Gottfredson (1997) for a recent inventory of approaches.
the program has been accused of serving as a fig leaf for politicians who want to appear to have done something about the problems of drug abuse and violence at schools but who also regularly attack each other across party lines for the program’s deficiencies.

To help inform congressional deliberations on the SDFSCA’s renewal, the Department of Education asked RAND’s Drug Policy Research Center to examine the problems and assess options for improvement. As part of the study, RAND commissioned three analyses of school drug and violence prevention and prepared a background paper describing the history and development of the SDFSCA program. Two focus groups were conducted with teachers and practitioners on the drug and violence problems in their schools and on their experiences with the program in their districts. These activities were preparatory to a two-day conference held in July 1999, which was attended by programmatic and policy leadership from the ED, classroom teachers and local program operators, high-level representatives with drug and violence prevention responsibilities in the departments of Justice and Health and Human Services, and prominent researchers and policy analysts.

The commissioned papers, a summary of the focus groups, and the background paper are contained in a companion volume. This report draws on those materials as well as the discussions at the conference to present a fresh analytical perspective on the SDFSCA program. Chapter Two examines the program’s problems. Chapter Three sets out some criteria for assessing options for reform and uses them to evaluate a reform proposal put forth by the Clinton administration. It also identifies and discusses some further directions in which reform might proceed. Our conclusions are summarized in Chapter Four.