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FACT SHEET

How Can We Prevent Gun Violence in American Schools?

These research-backed approaches can help create safer schools and end gun violence.

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Introduction

America's schools are among the safest places for children to be on a daily basis. But for the last 20 years, our students, educators, and parents have lived with rare yet devastating school shootings. This does not have to be. We can foster safe, supportive schools—free from gun violence—by addressing the factors that lead to violent incidents and implementing proven strategies that contribute to a healthy school climate.

This fact sheet lays out research-backed approaches for creating safer schools and ending gun violence. School leaders and policymakers must cultivate school environments that foster openness and safety for all students. This includes supporting and implementing strong gun safety laws and school-based interventions that can work to intervene in problems before shootings happen.

What do we know about gun violence in schools?

From 2013 to 2019, Everytown identified 549 incidents of gunfire on school grounds, including incidents of gun homicides and assaults, gun suicides and attempts, unintentional shootings, and mass shootings.[1]

School shooters usually have a connection to the school.

58%

of shooters were associated with the school–they were either current or former students, staff, faculty, or school resource officers.

Everytown for Gun Safety. "Gunfire On School Grounds Database". *Everytown for Gun Safety.* (2020). https://bit...

The majority of people who discharged a gun on school grounds—58 percent—were either current or former students, staff, faculty, or school resource officers.[2] Similarly, an analysis of the New York City Police Department's review of active shooter incidents in K–12 schools found that in 75 percent of these incidents, the shooter or shooters were school-age and were current or former students.[3]

Guns used by shooters under age 18 usually come from the home.

In up to 80 percent of incidents, underage shooters obtained their guns from their own home or the house of a relative or friend.[4]

There are warning signs before an act of targeted school violence occurs.

In all incidents of targeted school violence—100 percent—there were warning signs that caused others to be concerned. In 77 percent of incidents, other people were aware of the shooter's plans in advance.[5]

How can we prevent school gun violence?

Gun violence prevention policies are essential for preventing gun violence in schools.

A comprehensive school safety plan that keeps guns out of the wrong hands starts with effective gun violence prevention laws and programs that keep guns out of the wrong hands. State and federal elected officials need to pass gun violence prevention laws and then work to make sure that these laws are effectively implemented. School leaders—including school boards, superintendents, principals, and teachers—should voice their support for these laws with state and federal policymakers.

Gun violence prevention policies that will help to end school gun violence include:

EXTREME RISK LAWS

19 states

19 states and DC have enacted Extreme Risk laws: California, Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, Florida, Hawaii, Illinois, Indiana, Maryland, Massachusetts, Nevada, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, Oregon, Rhode Island, Vermont, Virginia, and Washington.

Cal. Penal Code § 18100, et. seq.; CRS § 13-14.5-101, et seq.; Conn. Gen. Stat. § 29-38c; 10 Del. C. § 7701, et seq.;...

This policy empowers family members, law enforcement, and, in some states, educators, to get a civil court order to temporarily prevent a person from accessing guns. These laws have proved to be an important tool for law enforcement in cases where a person who poses a risk to a school possesses, can purchase, or has access to firearms.[6]

Since 2018, 14 states and Washington, DC, have passed Extreme Risk laws, bringing the total number of states with these laws to 19.

SECURE STORAGE AND CHILD ACCESS PREVENTION LAWS

Secure storage laws require people to store firearms securely to prevent unsupervised access to firearms. A subset of these laws, known as child access prevention laws, specifically seeks to prevent unsupervised access by minors. Since the vast majority of school shooters under age 18 acquire guns from the home, gun owners securely storing their firearms is essential to preventing gun violence in schools.

RAISING THE MINIMUM AGE TO PURCHASE ALL SEMIAUTOMATIC FIREARMS TO 21

This policy can help block gun sales to teenagers. Data show that 18- to 20-year-olds commit gun homicides at triple the rate of adults 21 and older.[7] The shooter at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, was 19 years old. Under federal law, he could not have bought a handgun at a gun store. Yet he was legally allowed to buy the AR-15 assault-style rifle he used in the shooting because Florida law did not prohibit residents between 18 and 21 years old from buying long guns. Florida has since changed its law to prohibit the sale of firearms to people under 21 years old.[8]

BACKGROUND CHECKS

Requiring background checks on all gun sales can prevent teenagers and prohibited persons from taking advantage of the background checks loophole, which allows them to buy a firearm online or at a gun show with no background check.

School-based interventions can keep schools safe.

School leaders should voice their support for gun violence prevention measures that help keep guns out of schools. But school-based and data-driven measures can help end gun violence in schools also.

SCHOOLS MUST CREATE A SAFE AND AFFIRMING SCHOOL CLIMATE FOR ALL STUDENTS.

Students thrive in positive school environments. Supportive schools foster an affirming academic climate while also maintaining secure physical settings. Safe schools are built on trusting relationships among students, staff, and administrators.[9] They are also strengthened through positive relationships with the school's surrounding community members. This is why Everytown, the National Education Association (NEA), and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) recommend that schools work to become community schools. Community schools build affirming community partnerships that provide services to support students, families, and neighborhoods.

Safe schools are built on trusting relationships among students, staff, and administrators.

THREAT ASSESSMENT PROGRAMS AND CRISIS RESPONSE TEAMS CAN HELP SCHOOLS IDENTIFY AND DEESCALATE DANGEROUS SITUATIONS.

State legislators and schools should create and fund school-based threat assessment programs, also known as crisis response teams. These programs offer members of the school community the ability to share concerns that another member of the community may be at serious risk of harming themself or others.They establish multidisciplinary

teams of school staff that respond when a student shows they may be in crisis. These teams receive information about a potential threat made by a student, assess the threat, and design interventions to prevent violence. A 2018 Department of Homeland Security report stated that "preventing violence by detecting and addressing these [behavioral] red flags is more effective than any physical security measure."[10]

In order for threat assessment programs to be successful, they must have three key components in common. Successful threat assessment programs:

- **Identify** students at risk to themselves or others by establishing resources, such as anonymous tip lines or social media monitoring, to identify potential threats.[11] These programs can be effective, including at identifying students at risk of self-harm.[12] Still, they must uphold student civil rights and ensure there is not a disproportionate impact on historically marginalized students.
- **Address** student access to guns as part of any intervention plan.[13]
- **Invest** in school-based mental health services by hiring a sufficient number of psychologists, social workers, nurses, and counselors to work in schools.

0.5-3.5

Several studies have found that schools that have used threat assessment programs see as few as 0.5 to 3.5 percent of students carry out a threat of violence or attempt to.

Dewey Cornell et al., "Student Threat Assessment as a Standard School Safety Practice: Results from a Statewi...

Evidence suggests that the University of Virginia's Comprehensive Student Threat Assessment Guidelines (CSTAG) program is an effective tool for preventing school violence.[14] As a result, these programs are widely recommended for preventing school violence. In fact, several studies have found schools that have used threat assessment programs see as few as **0.5 to 3.5 percent** of students attempt to or carry out their threat of

violence. None of those threats were threats to kill, shoot, or seriously injure someone.[15] Studies also show that schools with CSTAG programs also see fewer suspensions, expulsions, and lead to fewer arrests.[16]

Importantly, when properly implemented this program should not have a disproportionate impact on Black or Latino students or students with disabilities. Studies have shown that CSTAG threat assessment programs generally do not.[17] Schools should collect their own data to ensure that these local programs do not disproportionately impact Black or Latino students or students with disabilities.

MENTAL HEALTH COUNSELORS CAN HELP CREATE A SAFE SCHOOL CLIMATE, REDUCING VIOLENCE.

As part of an effective threat assessment and management strategy, and to promote successful student outcomes and violence reduction overall, schools need to ensure that students have sufficient access to professionals who can provide mental health services, including psychologists, social workers, nurses, and counselors.

School-employed mental health professionals serve as a critical resource for students as they navigate the education system and the challenges of emotional and social development. These professionals may also be among the first to know when students are experiencing problems or when they are at a risk of turning to violence. They can guide students through emotional or behavioral problems and can serve as a key point of intervention and insight for threat assessment programs.

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Yet data compiled by the National Center for Education Statistics shows that the national student-to-counselor ratio is much higher than best practices dictate. The National Association of School Psychologists similarly found the student-to-psychologist ratio to be 1,381 students to 1 school psychologist—two to three times higher than the recommended

500-700 students.[18] To protect our schools and ensure that threat assessment programs are effective, legislatures need to fund—and schools need to prioritize hiring—an appropriate number of mental health professionals in schools.

SCHOOLS SHOULD PROVIDE SECURE STORAGE INFORMATION TO PARENTS.

School shooters typically obtain their guns from home, a relative's home or from friends—in up to 80 percent of incidents. Schools should then work to increase awareness about the importance of secure firearms storage. Public awareness programs, like the Be SMART program, developed by Moms Demand Action, promote awareness of secure gun storage.[19] They can also help create new norms to help prevent unauthorized access to guns. School districts across the country are passing resolutions requiring schools to provide parents with resources about secure gun storage. The parents of over 1.5 million students are now receiving this lifesaving information.

SCHOOLS SHOULD BE PROVIDED FUNDING TO IMPLEMENT APPROPRIATE SECURITY ENHANCEMENTS.

School safety experts[20] recommend that schools implement the following basic security measures to create effective intervention points when a shooter is targeting a school:

- **Access control:** Measures like single-access points, fencing, or external door locks that prevent unauthorized access to schools.
- **Interior door locks:** Interior door locks enable educators to lock out shooters and seal classrooms without exposing themselves to danger by stepping into hallways and the line of fire.

SCHOOLS SHOULD ESTABLISH CLEAR EMERGENCY PLANS.

Security experts, including the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), recommend that school districts have an emergency plan in place in the unlikely event a tragedy does occur.[21] These plans should help facilitate communication between school employees, law enforcement, and other first responders. These plans should also provide clear guidance and trauma-informed training on what staff should do in case of an

emergency. As discussed in detail here, active shooter simulations and drills have the potential to emotionally harm children and faculty and as a result should not be part of school emergency plans.

Which school safety measures have been harmful to students?

ARMING TEACHERS IS NOT AN EFFECTIVE STRATEGY FOR PREVENTING GUN VIOLENCE IN SCHOOLS.

Arming teachers is opposed by school safety experts, law enforcement, teachers, and parents.[22] In states that have laws aimed at arming school personnel, school staff receive significantly less training than law enforcement,[23] while in some of these states no minimum training is required at all. In March 2020, for example, the Ohio Appeals Court found that arming public school teachers with only 24 hours of training is illegal under state law.[24]

When teachers carry guns into schools, children are more likely to access those guns and the risk of shootings increases. Research has shown that in homes, the majority of children are fully aware of where their parents store their guns. More than one-third reported handling their parents' guns, many doing so without their parents' knowledge[25] Likewise, educators have already seen that the same is true in schools. There have been many incidents of students finding staff members' misplaced or unsecurely stored guns and discharging them.[26] There have also been several incidents of guns intentionally or unintentionally discharged on school grounds by school staff.[27]

OVERPOLICING OF SCHOOLS HAS HAD DETRIMENTAL IMPACTS ON STUDENTS.

School districts and communities have an earnest desire to protect against school shootings, but the practice of policing in schools, including the traditional School Resource Officer (SRO) model, has not been shown to reduce school shooting deaths. In fact, one study examined 179 shootings on school grounds from April 1999 through May 2018 and found that, generally, SROs—law enforcement professionals— did not make a difference in preventing deaths or injuries.[28]

3x

Black students in the US are three times more likely to be arrested in school than white students.

Emily K. Weisburst, "Patrolling Public Schools: The Impact of Funding for School Police on Student Discipline a...

In addition to research suggesting that SROs are not reliably effective at preventing gun violence in schools, research also shows their heavy role in criminalizing students. The presence of police in schools is associated with higher student arrest rates among all students.[29] But students of color bear disproportionate impacts.[30] Black students are three times more likely to be arrested than white students, while Indigenous students are two times more likely to be arrested than white students. Latino students are also more likely to be arrested than their white counterparts.[31] Research also suggests that exposure to policing decreases test scores, graduation rates, and college enrollment for Black students.[32]

It's important to note that the disproportionate treatment of students of color is not due to disproportionate misconduct. There is, in fact, no evidence that higher rates of misbehavior among these students account for the significantly higher likelihood of their being disciplined by school police compared with their white peers.[33]

Policing in schools disproportionately affects other students belonging to historically marginalized groups as well. Students with disabilities are also almost three times more likely to be subject to school arrest than students without disabilities.[34] Research has also found that LGBTQ and gender nonconforming students often report feeling hostility from law enforcement in schools and have a higher likelihood of being stopped by police, suspended, expelled, or arrested.[35]

ACTIVE SHOOTER DRILLS MAY BE HARMFUL TO STUDENTS' MENTAL HEALTH AND WELL-BEING.

There is growing evidence that active shooter drills have negative impacts on student well-being and development. Unannounced, extreme simulations are particularly harmful. A scientific study by Everytown and Georgia Tech revealed that active shooter drills can lead to alarming and sustained increases in depression, stress and anxiety, and fear of death

among students, parents, and educators.[36] Everytown, the AFT, and the NEA do not recommend including students in drills based on the evidence. However, 95 percent of schools have some type of drill.[37]

If schools choose to include students in these exercises, Everytown, the AFT, and the NEA recommend, at a minimum, that:

- Schools should create age and developmentally appropriate drill content with the involvement of school personnel, including school-based mental health professionals.
- Schools should couple drills with trauma-informed approaches to address students' well-being.
- Drills should not include simulations that mimic an actual incident.
- Parents should have advance notice of drills.
- Drills should be announced to students and educators prior to the start.
- Schools should track data about the efficacy and effects of drills.[38]

Conclusion

Policymakers can help prevent gun violence in schools by implementing proactive, evidence-based interventions. Targeted gun violence prevention policies can prevent guns from falling into the wrong hands and being used in a school-based shooting. School-based strategies can work to intervene when a student shows signs of crisis. Planning and security strategies, as a last line of defense, can ensure that a school is prepared to quickly respond appropriately to any threat. Our leaders must take responsible action to keep our schools safe. They can do so with data-driven strategies that have been proven to reduce violence in schools.

Everytown Research & Policy is a program of Everytown for Gun Safety Support Fund, an independent, non-partisan organization dedicated to understanding and reducing gun violence. Everytown Research & Policy works to do so by conducting methodologically

rigorous research, supporting evidence-based policies, and communicating this knowledge to the American public.

[1] For seven full years beginning in 2013, Everytown collected detailed information on all incidents of gunfire on school grounds. Everytown defined incidents of gunfire on school grounds as "Any time a gun discharges a live round inside (or into) a school building, or on (or onto) a school campus or grounds," where "school" refers to elementary, middle, and high schools—K–12—as well as colleges and universities. Of the 549 incidents identified between 2013 and 2019, 347 occurred on the grounds of an elementary, middle, or high school, resulting in 129 deaths and 270 injuries. This analysis informs the lessons in this document. The analysis here reflects information related to gunfire on the grounds of K–12 schools only and is supplemented by external research. More information is available at https://everytownresearch.org/gunfire-in-school/ and https://everytownresearch.org/scool-safety-plan.

[2] Everytown's analysis of gunfire on school grounds revealed that across all forms of gun violence in America's schools, shooters often have a connection to the school. Everytown was able to determine both the shooter's intent and relationship to the school for 269 of the 395 shooters.

[3] New York City Police Department, "Active Shooter: Recommendations and Analysis for Risk Mitigation," 2016, https://on.nyc.gov/2nWHM4O. Everytown's analysis doesn't require a definition of "active shooter," but as used in this report generally, we are referring to shooters actively engaged in killing or attempting to kill people at a school. Specifically, the New York City Police Department (NYPD), adopting a definition created by the US Department of Homeland Security defines an active shooter as "a person(s) actively engaged in killing or attempting to kill people in a confined and populated area." In its definition, DHS notes that, "in most cases, active shooters use firearm(s) and there is no pattern or method to their selection of victims." The NYPD has limited this definition to include only cases that spill beyond an intended victim to involve others, including bystanders and collateral casualties.

[4] Everytown for Gun Safety Support Fund, American Federation of Teachers, and National Education Association, "Keeping Our Schools Safe: A Plan for Preventing Mass Shootings and Ending All Gun Violence in American Schools," 2020, https://everytownresearch.org/school-safety-plan. This analysis of Everytown's Gunfire on School Grounds found that 74 percent of shooters obtained the gun(s) used from their home or the homes of relatives or friends (National Threat Assessment Center et al., "Protecting America's Schools: A US Secret Service Analysis of Targeted School Violence" [US Secret Service, Department of Homeland Security, 2019], https://bit.ly/2U7vnwa). The

study analyzed 41 incidents of targeted school violence from 2008 through 2017, finding that of the 25 incidents that involved firearms, 76 percent of shooters acquired the gun(s) used in the incidents from their home or that of a relative. This report also included a summary of a previous analysis of 37 incidents of targeted school violence from 1974 through June 2000, finding that of the 36 incidents that involved firearms, 73 percent of shooters acquired the gun(s) used in the incidents from their home or that of a relative (John Woodrow Cox and Steven Rich, "'The Gun's Not in the Closet,'" *Washington Post*, August 1, 2018, https://wapo.st/2TyDnTW). The study analyzed 145 acts of gun violence at primary and secondary schools involving shooters under the age of 18 from 1999 through mid-2018, finding that of the 105 cases in which the gun's source was identified, 80 percent were acquired from the child's home or those of relatives or friends (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Division of Violence Prevention, "Source of Firearms Used by Students in School-Associated Violent Deaths, United States, 1992–1999," *MMWR Weekly* 52, no. 9 (March 7, 2003): 169–72. The study analyzed school-associated firearm violent deaths committed by students between July 1992 and June 1999, finding that of the 99 cases in which the gun's source was identified, 79 percent of guns used were obtained from the shooter's home or that of a friend or relative.

[5] National Threat Assessment Center et al., "Protecting America's Schools: A US Secret Service Analysis of Targeted School Violence" (US Secret Service, Department of Homeland Security, 2019), https://bit.ly/2U7vnwa. The study analyzed 41 incidents of targeted school violence from 2008 through 2017.

[6] Everytown for Gun Safety Support Fund, "Extreme Risk Laws Save Lives: Stories," April 17, 2020, https://everytownresearch.org/report/appendix-a-extreme-risk-laws-save-lives-stories/.

[7] Everytown analysis using FBI Supplementary Homicide Report (SHR) and US Census American Community Survey data 2016–2020. Analysis includes all homicide offenses (i.e., murders, non-negligent manslaughters, negligent manslaughters, and justifiable homicides) known to law enforcement and reported to SHR by participating agencies. Young people aged 18–20 committed homicides at a rate of 6.95 per 100,000 people of the same age group in the US population, compared to a rate of 2.31 per 100,000 adults aged 21 and older.

[8] Fla. Stat. 790.065(13).

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[16] Dewey Cornell et al., “Racial/Ethnic Parity in Disciplinary Consequences Using Student Threat Assessment,” ed. Jessika Bottiani, School Psychology Review 47, no. 2 (2018): 183–95, https://doi.org/10.17105/SPR-2017-0030.V47-2; Dewey G. Cornell, Korrie Allen, and Xitao Fan, “A Randomized Controlled Study of the Virginia Student Threat Assessment Guidelines in Kindergarten through Grade 12,” School Psychology Review 41, no. 1 (2012):

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[23] Law enforcement officers receive an average of 840 hours of basic training, including 168 hours of training on weapons, self-defense, and the use of force (Brian A. Reaves, "State and Local Law Enforcement Training Academies, 2013," Bulletin [Washington, DC: US Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Statistics, July 2016], https://bit.ly/2pg0whI). Even some of the most highly trained law enforcement officers in the country, those of the New York City Police Department, see their ability to shoot accurately decrease significantly when engaged in gunfights with perpetrators

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