Impacts of Safety Threats: Reporting and Mitigating the Effects on the School Community

by Erika Felix, Ph.D.

IN THIS BRIEF:

▸ Statistics and impacts of safety threats

▸ Actions boards can take to improve school climate

▸ Sample questions for board members

▸ Relevant guidance and resources

▸ Relevant board policies and administrative regulations

DEFINITIONS:

▸ **School violence:** A continuum of behaviors beyond an active assailant planning a mass attack on a school can be considered school violence. More common forms of school violence include bullying, peer victimization, physical aggression, and general threats.

▸ **Trauma-informed:** The National Child Traumatic Stress Network states, "A trauma-informed school system (K-12) is one in which all teachers, school administrators, staff, students, families, and community members recognize and respond to the behavioral, emotional, relational, and academic impact of traumatic stress on those within the school system."

▸ **Developmentally appropriate:** This refers to taking into consideration the age and developmental level of the child(ren) being affected by a program, service, or practice.

Schools are safe places

Schools are one of the safest places for children to be,[1] and, over the last few decades, we have made progress on improving many indicators of school safety, such as declines in theft, violent victimization, bullying, and sexual harassment.[2] The good news is that schools are doing things that work and should continue these efforts. However, over the past decade, we have also seen increases in cyberbullying, verbal abuse, and disrespect of school staff, as well as the most extreme form of school violence — school shootings.[3]

This brief addresses the impact of threats on students and staff and describes promising practices for managing threats and improving school climate, including a discussion of behavioral threat assessments.

Preparation is key

Active assailant threats are top of mind for educators, parents, and students given numerous high profile school attacks in recent years. Most school threats, however, are related to more common forms of school violence, such as bullying, peer victimization, physical fights, and verbal harassment, which do not rise to an active assailant threat.[4] Out of 6,006 tips to one statewide school safety tipline over 43 months, for example, only 228 (4 percent) were about a mass attack threat. Instead, most reports to the tipline involved bullying or harassment, suicides other students were planning, and self-harm.[5]

Consequently, schools need to be trained and prepared to handle the full range of school safety concerns, not only active assailant threats, and understand their potential impact on mental health, academic achievement, and school climate. All members of the school community need to work together to create a school climate where

threats and safety concerns are reported and handled promptly and fairly in a developmentally appropriate and trauma-informed manner that is helpful to all parties in resolving the problem. Creating a comprehensive system for reporting and handling threats is one key step to the prevention of school violence.

Safety concerns can impact a range of student outcomes

Students' perception of safety at their school is associated with their mental health and academic achievement, and fighting, threats, and bullying diminishes their sense of safety.[6] This section reviews the most recent research on the impact of school violence on students' academics, mental health, and well-being. The most recent research from the California Healthy Kids Survey on students' perceived safety at school reports that 61 percent of seventh grade students felt very safe or safe, while 55 percent of ninth graders, 54 percent of 11th graders, and 56 percent of continuation high school students reported feeling very safe or safe.[7]

Academic impacts

We must recognize that research is unable to fully disentangle the impact of threats on academic achievement from the other indicators of school violence linked to diminished academic performance because threats co-occur with bullying, physical aggression, and peer harassment. To date, it is challenging to find studies that exclusively examine threats, let alone the small subset of threats that are about a mass attack. Therefore, this brief looks at the broader research on school violence and academics.

In a comprehensive review and meta-analysis of over 114 longitudinal studies on school violence, a team of researchers found that school violence was significantly associated with more unexcused absences, being less likely to graduate, and lower grade point averages.[8] The impact on academic performance is likely because school safety concerns can increase depression, and the symptoms associated with depression can diminish school performance.[9] Depression and anxiety can impair a student's ability to pay attention and focus in class, complete school assignments, and attend classes, all of which can impact academic performance.[10]

On the more extreme end of school safety concerns, a Stanford University policy brief about the impact of school shootings found that school shootings were associated with increased student absences post-shooting, declining student enrollment, declines in average test scores, more students needing to repeat a grade, and affected students' likelihood of graduating high school, attending college, and graduating college.[11]

Mental health and well-being impacts

Threats and acts of school violence of all types affect the mental health of both the perpetrators and the victims.[12]

Perpetration is significantly related to depression and delinquent behavior, whereas victimization is related to depression and other mental health problems.[13]

Schools are increasingly likely to experience lockdowns, either due to real or hoax threats to the school community. According to the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP), lockdowns can impact the stress levels of all involved and exacerbate existing anxiety, depression, or traumatic stress symptoms in staff and students.[14]

Finally, there is a stark effect of school shootings on the well-being of the entire student body, as well as students from surrounding schools in the community.[15] Research has demonstrated that school shootings can have a traumatic ripple effect regionally beyond the school borders where the incident occurred. A study examining the impact of 44 U.S. school shootings found a 21 percent increase in prescriptions for anti-depressant medication for youth under the age of 20 in communities within five miles of a school shooting, compared to communities 10-15 miles from a school shooting.[16] For example, there was a decrease in life expectancy (particularly for males) in the years following the Columbine school shooting among residents of Jefferson County, Colorado, in which Columbine is located, who were high-school aged at the time of the shooting.[17] The decreased life expectancy was due to deaths by suicide and accidents among youth, not because of illness. Therefore, even schools not directly targeted need to plan for supporting their students' mental health in the aftermath of a mass attack at any school in their community.

STEPS TO REDUCE STRESS DURING LOCKDOWNS AND DRILLS

Because lockdowns and safety drills can be stressful for students and staff, NASP offers several recommendations to mitigate the harm of planned lockdowns, and these strategies can also help after lockdowns due to hoax threats. For planned lockdown drills, NASP highly recommends a multidisciplinary planning team always announce drills to the entire school community, and ensures a school administrator is present during the drill, among other recommendations.

During a lockdown, NASP recommends clearly communicating whether there is an imminent risk, having all staff model a controlled response to mitigate student distress, communicating clearly with families via a pre-established communication system and through social media, and having a designated member of the crisis team monitoring social media to address any misinformation.

After a lockdown, share an update on social media and work with a public information officer to communicate with parents and other relevant parties, recognize and support trauma reactions among all members of the school community, conduct an evaluation of the lockdown, and incorporate lessons learned into future efforts.

School climate plays a key role in preventing school violence

The U.S. Secret Service National Threat Assessment Center (NTAC) studied 41 U.S. school attacks that occurred at K-12 schools from 2008 to 2017 and found that 77 percent of attackers threatened their targets or otherwise shared information about their plan to attack, thus potentially providing an opportunity to prevent the attack.[18] This report also supports what its previous investigations had concluded — that there is no profile of a student who would attack their school, nor is there a profile of the type of school that is at increased risk of having an attack. Their analysis revealed that attackers varied across age, gender, race, grade level, school performance, and social characteristics. The schools targeted represent a range of school sizes, geographic locations and types, and student-teacher ratios. Indeed, in the 2020–21 academic year, more elementary schools had shootings (fatal and non-fatal) than high schools, and both public and private schools experienced shootings.[19]

Commonalities found across attacks:

‣ Most attackers told someone about their plan;

‣ Attackers experienced a multitude of stressors of different varieties, with a common stressor being peer problems;

‣ Grievances against the attackers were increasing, including from peers, school staff, and others.

Unfortunately, NTAC found that only 17 percent of schools that experienced an attack had a system in place for the school community to report threats before the attack. Based on this, schools need to develop a system for addressing and reporting school safety concerns. NTAC, along with NASP and leaders in school safety, also recommend a comprehensive, multidisciplinary, developmentally appropriate, trauma-informed threat assessment and management team to distinguish serious threats from impulsive, hyperbolic statements often made out of anger.[20]

Behavioral threat assessment is addressed further in another brief, **(link to behavioral threat assessment)**, which offers ways schools can increase the likelihood of students reporting threats.

A school can only respond to a threat if they know about it. Thus, creating an environment where students and staff feel comfortable coming forward, believe that the school can help, and have the ability to easily report via a variety of methods (e.g., text, call, online, etc.), with the option of anonymity, helps.[21] University of Virginia researchers Caroline Crichlow-Ball and Dewey Cornell reviewed several barriers to reporting threats, including:

‣ Perception of reporting as "snitching;"

‣ Fear of retaliation and peer disapproval of reporting;

‣ Fear of not being believed;

‣ Not being able to report anonymously or have confidentiality; and

‣ Fear of getting in trouble.[22]

When looking at willingness to report threats, researchers found that a minority of students who were not willing to report tended to be students who were suspended more often, had less engagement in school, did not perceive teachers as supportive, and did not believe school discipline structures were being fairly applied.[23] This finding reinforces the importance of a proactive approach to building a positive school climate.

School climate is key to preventing school violence. Building a positive school climate includes engaging and empowering students in safety preparedness.[24] Thus, it is important to prepare and train students on safety practices such as comprehensive reporting system to prevent peer and school violence.[25] Integrating student preparedness into all programs offered at schools such as curriculum, activities, assemblies, workshops, and listening sessions strengthens students' capacity and resilience.[26]

Staff well-being is also linked to a positive school climate

A positive school climate supports an environment where students and staff feel they can report threats and the report will be handled in a meaningful and helpful way.[27] The well-being of teachers and school personnel is foundational in establishing a positive school climate. This is critical to address, as students in schools where teachers perceived a supportive and structured climate were more likely to report homicidal threats.[28] Unfortunately, the American Psychological Association Task Force on Violence Against Educators and School Personnel found in its large-scale survey of educators that 33 percent of teachers and 37 percent of administrators reported verbal aggression or threats of violence from students, and 29 percent of teachers and 42 percent of administrators experienced this from parents.[29] Likewise, a significant minority experienced physical violence from students (14-22 percent depending on school role). Safety concerns contributed to high stress rates, and nearly half of the teachers surveyed, and approximately one-third of other school personnel (administrators, staff, school psychologists), reported a desire or plan to quit or transfer jobs.[30]

Actions boards can take to improve school climate

Governance teams can take several key actions to increase the likelihood that students will report threats and reduce the impacts of threats on students and staff. Below are some recommendations for supporting conditions that can improve reporting when threats are made:

Action 1: Consider investing in an anonymous threat reporting system.

Over half of public middle and high schools in the U.S. have implemented tiplines,[31] many of which allow anonymous reporting, which

is associated with an increase in students' likelihood to report.[32] Some examples are the Safe2Tell tipline in Colorado, and the Say Something Anonymous Reporting System created by the Sandy Hook Promise Foundation.[33] However, having technology available is not enough; there need to be policies and supportive practices in place to handle the variety of tips that come in, which can consist of reports of bullying, suicide, self-harm, and active assailant threats.[34] Students will need to be trained on how to report concerns and what they can expect if they use the system.[35]

Action 2: Ensure discipline practices are consistent, fairly applied, reward positive behavior, and avoid zero tolerance approaches.

Efforts to ensure that all students are treated fairly in school discipline matters can improve student willingness to report threats.[36] Regularly examining school disciplinary data by race/ethnicity, gender identity, special education status, and other demographics can help school administrators identify and address any disparities found. Avoid "zero tolerance" approaches to discipline, which decades of research have shown to have a chilling effect on students' willingness to report bullying, harassment, and threats.[37]

Action 3: Consider implementing a multi-disciplinary comprehensive threat assessment team.

Best practices in implementing a threat assessment team can be found on the NASP website. Having a variety of perspectives at the table, including those grounded in mental health and child development, can help reduce the bias inherent when individuals are making decisions alone. Siloed decision making can lead to disparities in discipline practices that have affected racial and ethnic minority populations and students with disabilities. Thus, having a multidisciplinary, well-trained team can improve school safety and reduce disparities in discipline.[38] To reduce the likelihood of an attack being carried out, threat assessment teams should address any stressors or grievances when a student makes a serious threat to harm the school community.

Students represent a large population of the school community; therefore, it is important to find ways to include student voice, engagement, and empowerment in the comprehensive threat assessment team. Student partnership can include:

▸ Participating in activities before, during, and after an emergency;

▸ Providing input on technology, safety policies, and emergency operations plans;

▸ Influencing peers, family, and community members to support and become involved in school safety; and

▸ Receiving training on emergency preparedness such as CPR, basic first aid, warning signs of suicide, bullying prevention, active shooters, opioids, and cybersafety best practices, and trends.[39]

Action 4: Allocate funding to support student and educator mental health and trauma-informed practices.

Threats and violence take a mental health toll on students, teachers, staff, and administrators. As noted earlier, this affects student academic achievement and educator stress and job turnover. Efforts to ensure the recommended ratio of school psychologists and school counselors to students within every school would not only help provide support for distressed students but would also help teachers in their efforts to meet the emotional, behavioral, and developmental needs of their students. Funding to support staff wellness and mental health can help with job retention and satisfaction. Training in trauma-informed practices is a key step in promoting a positive school climate.

Action 5: Train the school community on identifying and responding to distressed students.

In addition to training in risk factors and warning signs of violence,[40] the school community needs to understand how to support students who are experiencing bullying or harassment or are contemplating suicide, as these are the most common reports to existing school tiplines.[41] Making sure there is no "wrong door" for a student seeking help for themselves or others is critical to school safety. Governance teams should inquire about the measures schools are taking to track concerns and reduce the likelihood that reports are lost in the systems schools have adopted.

Questions for governance teams to consider

Questions board members may ask to provide oversight and ensure accountability regarding school safety include:

1) What mechanisms do we provide for students, educators, and parents to report threats to the school? How may this vary by grade level (e.g., elementary, middle, or high school)?

2) Can reports be made anonymously?

3) What training and coordination do we have to address the variety of threats and concerns received in a timely and helpful manner?

4) Once we know of a concern about school safety, whether it is a student experiencing bullying or the rarer active assailant threat, what policies and procedures do we have in place to address the concern?

5) What steps are being taken to ensure that these procedures reduce the likelihood of concerns being lost in the reporting system (e.g., if a key individual is unavailable, are there additional staff who can track reports)?

6) What data do we have about students' perceived sense of safety and other elements of school climate?

Relevant resources

National Association of School Psychologists Guidance on Threat Assessment at School

List of 10 facts and tips on threat assessment at school, along with relevant resources.

Threat Assessment at School (nasponline.org)

Comprehensive School Threat Assessment Guidelines

Original research on the threat assessment model (originally the Virginia Student Threat Assessment Guidelines, now the Comprehensive School Threat Assessment Guidelines (VSTAG, now known as CSTAG)). VSTAG is the only threat assessment model that has been tested in controlled studies and fully meets federal criteria for an evidence-based practice.

home — School Threat Assessment (schoolta.com)

National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments

National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments website provides resources such as research, briefs, fact sheets, videos, training, and guides on safe and supportive school environments.

Safety | National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments (NCSSLE) (ed.gov)

National Association of School Psychologists

Mitigating Psychological Effects of Lockdowns fact sheet.

Mitigating Psychological Effects of Lockdowns (nasponline.org)

CSBA Business Affiliates for School Safety and Culture

https://bit.ly/48TFtDM

Kaiser Permanente Thriving Schools Integrated Assessment

The Thriving School Integrated Assessment was developed for schools and districts to advance wellness and educational goals by incorporating health-related strategies for students and staff into school and district improvement efforts. This no-cost assessment, available to everyone on the Alliance for a Healthier Generation Action Center, provides actionable steps and credible resources to advance improvements — all rooted in an equitable approach to whole-child health.

Thriving Schools Integrated Assessment (kaiserpermanente.org)

Relevant CSBA board policies and administrative regulations

CSBA GAMUT Policy and Policy Plus subscribers have access to sample policies. The following are sample policies and administrative regulations relevant to discipline, suspension, bullying, and harassment.

▸ BP 0410 - Nondiscrimination in District Programs and Activities

▸ BP 1100 - Communication with the Public

▸ BP/AR 1250 - Visitors/Outsiders

▸ BP 1313 - Civility

▸ BP/AR 3515 - Campus Security

▸ BP 3515.7 - Firearms on School Grounds

▸ BP/AR 3516 - Emergencies and Disaster Preparedness Plan

▸ AR 3516.1 - Fire Drills and Fires

▸ AR 3516.2 - Bomb Threats

▸ BP/AR 4119.11 - Sexual Harassment

▸ BP 4219.11/ AR 4219.11 - Sexual Harassment

▸ BP 4319.11/ AR 4319.11 - Sexual Harassment

▸ BP/E 4119.12 - Title IX Sexual Harassment Complaint Procedures

▸ BP 4219.12/ E 4219.12 - Title IX Sexual Harassment Complaint Procedures

▸ BP 4319.12/ E 4319.12 - Title IX Sexual Harassment Complaint Procedures

▸ BP/AR 5144 - Discipline

▸ BP/AR 5144.1 - Suspension and Expulsion/Due Process

▸ BP/AR 5131.7 - Weapons and Dangerous Instruments

▸ BP 5131.8 - Mobile Communication Devices

▸ BP 5137 - Positive School Climate

▸ BP 5138 - Conflict Resolution/Peer Mediation

▸ BP 5141.5 - Mental Health

▸ BP/AR 5141.52 - Suicide Prevention

▸ BP 5145.2 - Freedom of Speech/Expression

▸ BP/AR 5145.3 - Nondiscrimination/Harassment

▸ BP 5145.9 - Hate-Motivated Behavior

▸ BP/AR 6145.5 - Student Organizations and Equal Access

▸ BP/AR 6159.1 - Procedural Safeguards and Complaints for Special Education

- BP 6159.4 - Behavioral Interventions for Special Education Students

- BP 6164.2 - Guidance/Counseling Services

- BP/AR 6164.4 - Identification and Evaluation of Individuals for Special
Education

- BP/AR 6164.5 - Student Success Teams

- BP 6164.6 - Identification and Education Under Section 504

Endnotes

1   Cornell, D. (2015). Our schools are safe: Challenging the misperception that schools are dangerous places. American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 85, 217-220. https://bit.ly/4aaidCw

2   Irwin, V., Wang, K., Cui, J., and Thompson, A. (2022). Report on Indicators of School Crime and Safety: 2021 (NCES 2022-092/NCJ 304625). National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education, and Bureau of Justice Statistics, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice. Washington, DC. Retrieved from https://bit.ly/3va125e.

3   See Endnote 2.

4   Carlton, M.P. (2021). School Safety: Research on Gathering Tips and Addressing Threats. *NIJ Journal 283*, October 2021. Retrieved from https://bit.ly/3wS0bqi.

    Hendrix, J.A., Planty, M.G., & Cutbush, S. (2022). Leakage warning behaviors for mass school violence: An analysis of tips reported to a state school safety tip line. Journal of Threat Assessment and Management, 9, 33-51. https://bit.ly/3Pl6sRK

    Polanin, J. R., Espelage, D. L., Grotpeter, J.K., Spinney, E., Ingram, K. M., Valido, A., El Sheikh, A., Torgal, C., & Robinson, L. (2021). A meta-analysis of longitudinal partial correlations between school violence and mental health, school performance, and criminal or delinquent acts. Psychological Bulletin, 147, 115-133. https://bit.ly/3TB4JKF

5   Carlton, M.P. (2021). School Safety: Research on Gathering Tips and Addressing Threats. *NIJ Journal 283*, October 2021. Retrieved from https://bit.ly/3wS0bqi.

6   Kim, Y.K., Sanders, J.E., Makubuya, T., & Yu, M. (2020). Risk factors of academic performance: Experience of school violence, school safety concerns, and depression by gender. Child & Youth Care Forum, 49, 725-742. https://bit.ly/3vb5Bfu

7   WestEd for the California Department of Education. California Healthy Kids Survey. (2017-2019). Retrieved from https://bit.ly/4cgly4U.

8   Polanin, J. R., Espelage, D. L., Grotpeter, J.K., Spinney, E., Ingram, K. M., Valido, A., El Sheikh, A., Torgal, C., & Robinson, L. (2021). A meta-analysis of longitudinal partial correlations between school violence and mental health, school performance, and criminal or delinquent acts. Psychological Bulletin, 147, 115-133. https://bit.ly/3TB4JKF

9   See Endnote 6.

10 See Endnote 5.

11 See Endnote 5.

12 See Endnote 7.

13 See Endnote 7.

14 See Endnote 5.

15 Rossin-Slater, M. (2022). *Surviving a school shooting: Impacts on the mental health, education, and earnings of American youth*. Policy Brief. Stanford Institute for Economic Policy Research. https://stanford.io/4cha691

16 See Endnote 5.

17 See Endnote 5.

18 See Endnote 5.

19 See Endnote 2.

20 National Threat Assessment Center. (2019). *Protecting America's Schools: A U.S. Secret Service Analysis of Targeted School Violence*. U.S. Secret Service, Department of Homeland Security. https://bit.ly/4a3W09c

    Carlton, M.P. (2021). School Safety: Research on Gathering Tips and Addressing Threats. *NIJ Journal 283*, October 2021. Retrieved from https://bit.ly/3wS0bqi.

    Hendrix, J.A., Planty, M.G., & Cutbush, S. (2022). Leakage warning behaviors for mass school violence: An analysis of tips reported to a state school safety tip line. *Journal of Threat Assessment and Management*, 9, 33-51. https://bit.ly/3Pl6sRK

21 See Endnote 5.

22 Crichlow-Ball, C. & Cornell, D. (2021). Association of school climate with student willingness to report threats of violence. Journal of Threat Assessment and Management, 8, 77-93. doi: 10.1037/tam0000163.

23 See Endnote 21.

24 Youth and Emergency Planning. (2023). Retrieved from https://bit.ly/3wRn7WO.

25 Readiness and Emergency Management for Schools Technical Assistance Center (REMS) (2023). *Building Youth Preparedness and School Safety Capacity by Integrating Educational Initiatives Fact Sheet*. Retrieved from https://bit.ly/49Pi33R.

26 See Endnote 24.

27 Reeves, M. A. L., & Brock, S. E. (2018). Responding to students who threaten violence: Helping handout for the school [Handout]. Bethesda, MD: National Association of School Psychologists.

Crichlow-Ball, C. & Cornell, D. (2021). Association of school climate with student willingness to report threats of violence. *Journal of Threat Assessment and Management*, 8, 77-93. https://bit.ly/3wRn7WO

28 See Endnote 21.

29 See Endnote 5.

30 McMahon, S.D., Anderman, E.M., Astor, R.A., Espelage, D.L., Martinez, A., Reddy, L.A., & Worrell, F.C. (2022). Violence Against Educators and School Personnel: Crisis During COVID. Policy Brief. American Psychological Association. https://bit.ly/3TyzRdJ

31 See Endnote 5.

32 Hendrix, J.A., Planty, M.G., & Cutbush, S. (2022). Leakage warning behaviors for mass school violence: An analysis of tips reported to a state school safety tip line. *Journal of Threat Assessment and Management*, 9, 33-51. doi: 10.1037/tam0000171.

33 See Endnote 5.

34 Carlton, M.P. (2021). School Safety: Research on Gathering Tips and Addressing Threats. *NIJ Journal 283*, October 2021. Retrieved from https://bit.ly/3wS0bqi.

Hendrix, J.A., Planty, M.G., & Cutbush, S. (2022). Leakage warning behaviors for mass school violence: An analysis of tips reported to a state school safety tip line. *Journal of Threat Assessment and Management*, 9, 33-51. https://bit.ly/3Pl6sRK

35 Reeves, M. A. L., & Brock, S. E. (2018). Responding to students who threaten violence: Helping handout for the school [Handout]. Bethesda, MD: National Association of School Psychologists.

36 See Endnote 21.

37 Cornell, D. (2015). Our schools are safe: Challenging the misperception that schools are dangerous places. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 85, 217-220. https://bit.ly/4aaidCw

McMahon, S.D., Anderman, E.M., Astor, R.A., Espelage, D.L., Martinez, A., Reddy, L.A., & Worrell, F.C. (2022). Violence Against Educators and School Personnel: Crisis During COVID. Policy Brief. American Psychological Association. https://bit.ly/3TyzRdJ

Carlton, M.P. (2021). School Safety: Research on Gathering Tips and Addressing Threats. *NIJ Journal 283*, October 2021. Retrieved from https://nij.ojp.gov/topics/articles/school-safety-research-gathering-tips-and-addressing-threats.

38 See Endnote 5.

39 Readiness and Emergency Management for Schools Technical Assistance Center (REMS) (2023). *K-12 Students as Partners in School Emergency Management Fact Sheet*. Retrieved from https://bit.ly/3wV11T8.

40 See Endnote 31.

41 See Endnote 5.