

## COMMENTARY

# Our Schools Are Safe: Challenging the Misperception That Schools Are Dangerous Places

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**M**assive public attention to school shootings has created the misperception that schools are dangerous places, even though crime statistics show that schools are one of the safest places in the United States. The fear of school shootings has caused many school systems to divert their budgets to excessive building security measures and adopt dubious crisis response plans. School disciplinary practices have shifted toward the criminalization of student misbehavior and a zero tolerance philosophy that fails to improve school safety and results in high rates of student suspensions and dropouts. The use of a threat assessment approach to evaluate individual student behavior in context and resolve conflicts and problems before they escalate into violence is one promising alternative that has been adopted statewide in Virginia public schools. School safety should focus on the everyday problems of bullying and fighting, and apply public health principles of primary and secondary prevention using well-established psychological interventions.

Even one school shooting is too many, and the Everytown map (see Figure 1; ●●●, 2015, p. ●●●, this issue) is a painful reminder that shootings continue to occur in our nation's schools. However, a map focused solely on school shootings conveys a message that schools are especially dangerous places. Ironically, the Everytown map, viewed from a broader perspective, shows us that *schools are one of the safest places in*

*the United States*. Consider the map of school shootings in comparison to the national prevalence of gun violence. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, there are approximately 84,258 nonfatal injuries and 32,351 deaths every year involving guns. These figures translate into about 319 shootings, including 88 deaths, every day in the United States. A map of the shootings that occur in one week in the United States would blot out the school shootings that occurred in the past 2 years.

The national media attention given to school shootings has the effect of biasing our understanding of how likely it is that a school will have a shooting, creating a false perception of imminent danger. Analysis of the School-Associated Violent Death study found that an average of more than two dozen school-age children were murdered every week in the United States, but only about 1% of those murders took place in schools.

A study of homicide locations conducted by Erin Nekvasil, myself, and Francis Huang found that murders are statistically rare in schools compared to other locations. In a 37-state sample of 18,875 homicide incidents recorded in the Federal Bureau of Investigation's National Incident Based Reporting System (NIBRS), only 49 incidents, comprising less than .3% of the total, took place in schools. The majority (52%) of homicides took place in residences, and 30% took place in parking lots or roads. Homicides, including multiple-victim shootings, occurred much more frequently in restaurants than in schools. What if the media relentlessly focused on every shooting in a restaurant with vivid accounts of the victims, survivors, and grieving family members? Would there be a national outcry about restaurant violence, a rush to fortify restau-

rant entrances, and a call from the National Rifle Association that restaurant servers should carry guns?

The larger problem is that gun violence is pervasive in the United States and occurs at a far higher rate than in other modern nations. For example, the gun homicide rate in the United States is at least 7 times higher than the rates in Australia, Canada, France, Germany, India, Italy, Japan, South Korea, Spain, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and many others. Although beyond the scope of this commentary, there are promising strategies and public policies for preventing gun violence that have yet to be adequately implemented (see, e.g., the American Psychological Association's, 2013 report entitled "Gun Violence: Prediction, Prevention, and Policy").

It should not be surprising that, in a country flooded with tremendously high rates of gun violence, some of this violence takes place in schools. By analogy, if a city experienced an actual flood, no one would single out the flooded schools as an isolated problem and overlook the flooding in the rest of the community. Schools certainly deserve protection from floods, but community leaders would look to the source of the flood rather than focus their attention solely on schools. They would devote tax dollars to building levies to prevent flooding rather than simply devising new plans for rescuing people after a flood occurs.

A rough calculation illustrates how improbable a student homicide is at the average school. According to the U.S. Department of Education, over a 10-year period (1996–2006) there was an average of 21 student homicides per year in the nation's 125,000 elementary and secondary schools. Simple division (125,000 divided by 21) indicates that the average school can expect a student homicide about once every 6,000

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years. Nevertheless, after intense media coverage of the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary in Newtown, Connecticut, millions of parents across the country became worried about the safety of their children in their

Multiple studies, such as one conducted in 2011 by sociologist Roney Bachman and colleagues, have concluded that security measures such as metal detectors do not increase school safety and, on the contrary,

*School Discipline Consensus Report*, the Council of State Governments Justice Center called for school systems to prohibit the use of law enforcement officers to respond to students' minor misbehavior that can be appropriately addressed through school discipline. They recommended a more selective and specialized process of identifying and training school-based officers who can promote a safe and supportive environment and help reduce the risk for youth involvement in the juvenile justice system.

## *The increased expenditures following the Sandy Hook shooting are providing a bonanza for school security companies, who are seeing billions of dollars in additional business*

neighborhood schools. The prospect of a shooting at their school seemed frighteningly ominous.

Excessive public fear of highly publicized events is not new. Sociologist Barry Glassner documented the tendency for news stories of frightening incidents to incite unwarranted public fear of plane crashes, satanic cults, and Halloween sadists. The 1990s fear of mythical teenage "superpredators" stimulated widespread changes in the juvenile justice system and a surge of juvenile incarcerations in adult prisons. In 2014, a few cases of Americans with the Ebola virus prompted fears of a national epidemic, even though common influenza is a far more serious threat, killing thousands of Americans every year. These examples illustrate that the fear of school violence is not a unique problem, but part of a general human tendency to misjudge the risk of danger.

### **The Consequences of School Shooting Fears**

The unwarranted fear of school shootings has serious negative consequences. One major consequence is that school authorities feel compelled to divert massive amounts from their strained school budgets to school security measures, such as metal detectors, alarm systems, surveillance cameras, remodeled building entrances, and electronic door locks. The increased expenditures following the Sandy Hook shooting are providing a bonanza for school security companies, who are seeing billions of dollars in additional business. There is also a hidden cost to the safety of the community when law enforcement agencies are pressured to pull officers from community patrols to post guards at school entrances.

make students feel less safe at school. There is little evidence that schools with increased security personnel are safer or that they promote better student behavior, but research on this topic is limited and further study is needed using more rigorous methods.

### **Dubious Crisis Response Plans**

School systems need well-designed crisis response plans so that they are prepared for a wide range of hazards, such as severe weather, fires, and threats of violence. However, the fear of school shootings has prompted widespread adoption of lockdown drills and active shooter drills that go too far in their effort to simulate violent attacks. Some drills involve students role-playing as victims or huddling under desks while a mock intruder attempts to break into classrooms. School administrators have adopted dubious practices such as training students to attack armed adults; one school system requested that students bring canned goods to school so that they could throw them at an armed gunman. Capitalizing on parental fears, businesses have marketed bullet-proof backpacks and clothing to children.

### **Criminalization of Student Misbehavior**

Another consequence of the excessive concern with school safety is the criminalization of student misbehavior. Although appropriately trained school resource officers with well-defined roles can serve valuable functions in schools, the presence of law enforcement officers can result in arrests and criminal charges against students for relatively minor misbehavior such as disorderly conduct and simple assault. In *The*

### **Zero Tolerance Suspensions**

One of the most devastating consequences of school violence fear has been the widespread adoption of zero tolerance discipline practices. The federal Gun-Free Schools Act of 1994 required states to pass legislation mandating schools to expel students found with a firearm at school. Although the federal law permitted school authorities to make exceptions in extenuating circumstances, state laws and local school policies were often less flexible. Furthermore, zero tolerance for firearms expanded into a general philosophy of automatically suspending students for an increasingly wide range of infractions, even if the student's behavior was accidental or posed no serious threat to others. For example, students have been suspended for misbehavior such as pointing their fingers like a gun or pretending to shoot someone with a pencil.

Zero tolerance practices have fueled a nationwide increase in school suspension. Consensus has emerged that school suspension is a counterproductive practice that fails to improve student behavior and instead has negative effects on students. For example, a longitudinal study of approximately 1 million Texas students conducted by researchers with the Council of State Governments Justice Center and Texas A&M University found that suspensions increased the likelihood of school failure, dropout, and juvenile court involvement. Likewise, a report from the Center for Civil Rights Remedies at the University of California, Los Angeles, found that schools that make greater use of suspension as a disciplinary practice have lower graduation rates than other schools, even after controlling for differences in school demographics. Because the school discipline system seems to facilitate rather than deter the development of juvenile of-

fending, critics have labeled this process the “school-to-prison pipeline.”

The overuse of school suspension has had greatest impact on minority students, especially Black and Hispanic youth. Studies have found that racial disparities in suspension rates cannot be explained by differences in serious offending, such as fighting or bringing weapons to school, but are the result of high suspension rates for relatively minor misbehavior among the minority students. In a sharply worded “Dear Colleague” letter in 2014, the U.S. Department of Justice and U.S. Department of Education jointly called upon school authorities to examine whether their student discipline practices discriminate on the basis of race, color, or national origin. They called for school authorities to reconsider the use of zero tolerance policies and to strive for positive school climates that use less punitive and more constructive approaches to discipline.

### Student Threat Assessment

After a series of school shootings culminating in the 1999 shooting at Columbine High School, schools increasingly used school suspension or expulsion as a zero tolerance response to students who seemed dangerous or in some way threatened violence. Studies of school shootings by both the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the Secret Service recommended that schools turn away from a zero tolerance approach and instead use a behavioral threat assessment approach. Threat assessment was a new concept for educators, but is a strategy developed in law enforcement to prevent violence by distinguishing serious threats from those that pose no real danger. Threat assessment is used by the U.S. Secret Service, the U.S. State Department, and the U.S. Marshal Service to protect federal officials, and is a recommended practice for the prevention of workplace violence.

Threat assessment is a process of evaluating individuals who threaten to harm others, or engage in threatening behavior, to determine whether their behavior demonstrates a serious intent to carry out a violent act. Many individuals might threaten violence as an expression of frustration or anger, but lack genuine intent to harm someone. Others might be capable of violence, but the threat could be ameliorated through counseling, conflict mediation, or some other intervention that resolves the underlying

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### Suggested Website

University of Virginia, Curry School of Education. *Threat assessment*. Retrieved from <http://curry.virginia.edu/research/projects/threat-assessment>

ing problem. In the most extreme cases, there may be a very serious threat that requires law enforcement intervention to prevent an imminent attack. A key aspect of threat assessment is its emphasis on considering the context and meaning of the student’s behavior and taking action proportionate to the seriousness of the student’s actions. This contrasts markedly with a zero tolerance approach, which applies the same harsh punishment in all cases regardless of the circumstances or the severity of the student’s behavior.

In 2002, our group at the University of Virginia developed a protocol and training program for school-based teams to conduct student threat assessments. Two field-tests demonstrated that school-based teams could carry out threat assessments in a practical, efficient manner without violent outcomes. Notably, almost all of the students were permitted to return to school, and few of the students received long-term suspensions or transfers to another school.

A series of controlled studies involving hundreds of schools have provided further support for the Virginia Student Assessment Guidelines. Staff training in threat assessment lowered concern about school shoot-

ings and decreased endorsement of zero tolerance. Two studies found that schools using the Virginia model for threat assessment experienced lower suspension rates and less bullying, and their students reported greater willingness to seek help for threats of violence. A randomized control study of 40 schools found that students who made threats of violence in schools using the Virginia Guidelines were approximately 4 times more likely to receive counseling services and 2.5 times more likely to receive a parent conference than students in control schools. Notably, students in the intervention group were about one-third as likely to receive a long-term suspension and one-eighth as likely to be transferred to a different school. In 2013, the Virginia Student Threat Assessment Guidelines became recognized as an evidence-based practice in the National Registry of Evidence-based Programs and Practices.

As schools across Virginia have adopted a threat assessment approach, research from a Study I conducted with JustChildren showed that suspension rates have declined. Among Virginia’s secondary schools, schools using the Virginia Guidelines recorded 15% fewer short-term suspensions and 25% fewer long-

term suspensions per year than other schools, controlling for school size, the percentage of low-income students, and the percentage of minority students. A promising finding was that suspension rates were lower for both White and Black students in schools using the Virginia Guidelines, and the lower rate for Black students substantially reduced the racial disparity in long-term suspensions. In 2013, Virginia legislation mandated that all its public schools establish threat assessment teams; a state-wide evaluation of this system is now under way.

### Student Safety

Student safety is essential for student health, well-being, and academic success. However, the most significant threats to student safety are not shootings, but less severe and more common forms of violence and aggression that require different prevention strategies than shootings. Bullying and fighting are the most prevalent problems, with relatively low rates of serious violent crime such as robbery and forcible rape. According to the Youth Risk Behavior Survey, 20% of female and 18% of male high school students reported being bullied at school in the past 12 months. Sixteen percent of boys and 8% of girls in Grades 9–12 reported being in a physical fight at school during the previous 12 months. According to the National Crime Victimization Survey, serious violent crime (robbery, forcible rape, and aggravated assault) was approximately 3.5 incidents per 1,000 students.

Schools need comprehensive, multitiered prevention programs to maintain a safe and

supportive climate. A meta-analysis conducted by Sandra Jo Wilson and Mark Lispey of the Peabody Research Institute at Vanderbilt University found that there are counseling programs and other psychological interventions that yield moderate to strong effects in reducing student aggression and improving student behavior. The nationwide movement to increase school security seems to have displaced efforts to prevent school violence through psychological interventions. School systems that are spending millions to reinforce their building entrances, hire security staff, and install electronic door locks and alarm systems nevertheless lack funds to hire enough counselors, psychologists, and social workers to work with troubled students and carry out prevention programs.

### Prediction Versus Prevention

One of the principal barriers to violence prevention efforts is a misunderstanding of the relation between prediction and prevention. Decades of research by many different investigators has found that there is only a moderate ability to identify individuals who subsequently commit serious acts of violence, and the idea that violent students could be identified by psychological profiles has been unequivocally dismissed in reports by the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the U.S. Secret Service, and the U.S. Department of Education. However, the unpredictability of violence in individual cases does not mean violence cannot be prevented on a larger scale. True prevention efforts must begin well before there is a gunman in the

school parking lot. Prevention can begin at a primary level by helping families to raise healthy, well-adjusted children and improving school and community services. Secondary prevention can ameliorate risk factors ranging from behavioral problems, bullying, and mental disorders, to social and economic disadvantages.

There are obvious examples in the public health field of primary and secondary prevention programs that have been hugely successful in reducing the rates of individually unpredictable outcomes. For example, motor vehicle accidents occur unexpectedly and seem unpredictable, but there is ample evidence that traffic safety laws, driver training, and well-designed cars and roads reduce the rate of accidents. Another example is the public health campaign to reduce smoking that has saved millions of lives.

A substantial body of scientific evidence identifies important developmental, familial, and social risk factors for violence that can form the basis for public health interventions. Along these lines, a variety of rigorously tested psychological and educational interventions, such as those described in a 2013 report by the American Psychological Association, have been found to promote healthy social and emotional development. Educators, mental health professionals, and social scientists must help correct misperceptions about school safety and share the understanding that seemingly unpredictable violence can be prevented.

**Keywords:** school safety; violence prevention; threat assessment