School Safety
Can gun violence in schools be prevented?
By Lorna Collier

When the shooting began on May 7, students at the STEM School Highlands Ranch charter school — located seven miles from Columbine High School outside Denver, Colo. — were watching The Princess Bride as part of an afternoon British literature class. A witness later said that an 18-year-old classmate, who had arrived late, pulled a handgun from his guitar case, ordered everyone to stay still and began shooting.¹

That’s when 18-year-old Kendrick Castillo lunged at the alleged shooter, giving other students the seconds they needed to duck under desks or flee. Castillo was shot and killed. At least two other students also fought back, ultimately subduing and disarming the alleged shooter. The school’s private security guard apprehended another alleged shooter, a 16-year-old student.²

The shooting left eight students wounded, and Castillo’s family grieving the loss of their only child. Castillo’s father, John, said he had told his son not to be a hero if he were ever caught in a school shooting. But Kendrick had protested to his dad: “You raised me to be a good person.”³

“I wish he had gone and hid,” Castillo said, “But that’s not his character.”³

Twenty years after the Columbine High School shooting in Littleton, Colo., in which two teenage gunmen killed 12 students and a teacher and wounded 23 others, school shootings are on the rise, and educators and lawmakers are still struggling to find ways to prevent such attacks. Many of the recommendations, such as
School Gun Incidents Spiked in 2018

The number of gun-related incidents on U.S. elementary, middle and high school grounds reached a record 97 in 2018, more than double the total in 2017, according to the federal government’s Center for Homeland Defense and Security at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, Calif. The data reflect all incidents in which a gun was brandished or fired or a bullet hit school property. Incidents ranged from mass shootings, which are rare, to those in which an armed individual was stopped before violence occurred.

Annual Number of Gun-Related Incidents at K-12 Schools, 1970-2019*

* 2019 data as of May 7.


The center counts all incidents in which a gun is brandished or fired or a bullet hits school property for any reason; some shootings may occur when school is not in session and may involve shootings and victims who are not students or faculty.

Another analysis of school shootings using a different set of criteria, conducted by Education Week, found that in 2018 there were 24 school shootings resulting in 35 people killed (including 28 students) and 79 injured. Of those two dozen shootings, only two were mass shootings defined by the FBI as resulting in at least four deaths. Those were the Valentine’s Day shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Fla., and the shooting three months later at Santa Fe High School in Santa Fe, Texas — with a total of 27 killed and 30 wounded in the two incidents.5

Although such mass shootings attract extensive media coverage when they occur at K-12 schools, typically only about one such incident occurs each year, a rate that experts say has remained relatively steady for two decades.6 Moreover, gun-related incidents also occur on university campuses, such as the April 30 shooting at the University of North Carolina, Charlotte, which left two students dead and four others injured. But gun violence in K-12 schools has drawn the most attention from Congress and the president.

President Trump and federal and state lawmakers have responded to the threat in a variety of ways, including beefing up security at schools and recommending arming some teachers and school staff. The administration also has recommended rescinding a federal law that designates schools as “gun free” zones, which critics say make schools vulnerable targets for shooters.

In addition, in December 2018 the Department of Education rescinded Obama-era guidelines aimed at minimizing racial disparities in school discipline. Opponents of the guidelines said they made administrators reluctant to suspend or expel dangerous students.7

Arming teachers or requiring background checks for all gun purchases, are controversial, as is a trend toward increased surveillance of students, which has raised privacy concerns. In addition, mental health experts say some proposed measures, such as practicing active-shooter drills and “hardening” school structures, have deepened anxiety among students already worried about their safety, especially younger ones.

“Right now we’re struggling in the United States to get a handle on what the right approaches are to this,” says Amy Klinger, a former teacher and principal who heads The Educator’s School Safety Network, an Ohio-based group that provides training in school safety. Rather than adopting prevention strategies proven to work, she says, “We keep having these conversations about ‘Why is this happening? Why can’t we prevent it? What are we doing wrong?’”

The number of gun-related incidents on K-12 school grounds skyrocketed in 2018 to a record 97, more than double the number in 2017, making last year the worst for such occurrences recorded by the Center for Homeland Defense and Security. The center, sponsored by the U.S. Federal Emergency Management Administration and located at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, Calif., has been tracking school shootings since 1970.4
After the Parkland shooting, the Trump administration also banned bump stocks, devices that enable semi-automatic weapons to fire as fast as machine guns. The devices have not been used in school shootings but were used in the deadliest mass shooting in modern U.S. history — a 2017 massacre in Las Vegas, Nev., that killed 58, wounded 422 and led to 429 injuries in the ensuing panic.9

A month after the Parkland incident, Trump met with student survivors of the shooting and vowed that his administration would be “very strong on background checks.” But this year, when the Democratic-controlled House passed two bills designed to strengthen such checks, the president said he would veto them, arguing they restrict the rights of gun owners. Gun-rights groups oppose both bills, which would require background checks for all firearms sales — including those purchased online or at gun shows — and extend the three-day review period for such checks to 10 days.9

“The overwhelming majority of American gun owners are hardworking, law-abiding citizens,” said Republican Rep. Guy Reschenthaler of Pennsylvania during a House Judiciary Committee hearing on one of the measures. A gun owner, Reschenthaler called the bill “the first step to creating a national gun registry” and said it “does nothing to address the root causes of gun violence” such as the need for more mental health services.10

Parkland student survivors, who have organized a nationwide movement to push for stricter gun laws, had lobbied for the two House measures. The students also oppose arming teachers and want more funds for student mental health services. “There is no evidence that [arming teachers] will make me or my classmates any safer,” Sari Kaufman, a Parkland survivor, wrote in a newspaper op-ed. “All arming teachers will do is increase the likelihood of gun violence in our schools.”11

After Parkland, Trump created the Federal Commission on School Safety, headed by Education Secretary Betsy DeVos, to recommend ways to reduce school violence. In its final report last December the panel called for arming trained school personnel, encouraging states to adopt so-called red flag laws that allow courts to temporarily disarm individuals considered a threat to themselves or others and providing more student mental health services. But the panel did not recommend increased federal funding for any of the measures.12

In recent years, many school districts and state legislators have proposed or enacted measures to harden school security, such as installing bulletproof or bullet-resistant doors and windows and adding more surveillance cameras, as well as arming officers, teachers or staff and boosting mental health services. In addition, most districts now conduct training drills, which are mandatory in some states, requiring teachers and children of all ages to practice what they would do in an active shooter situation.

During the 2017-18 academic year, more than 4.1 million children — including 220,000 kindergarten or prekindergarten students — participated in school lockdowns in response to incidents or threats at their schools or nearby facilities, a Washington Post investigation found. However, the number likely is much higher, The Post said, because many districts do not report or track lockdowns, which are emergency protocols in which students are moved indoors, doors are locked and no one is allowed to enter or exit the building.13

Some child health advocates worry that lockdowns could cause psychological damage. “We have very good data that children in proximity to frightening circumstances, such as those that trigger school lockdowns, are at risk for lasting symptoms,” including depression, anxiety, poor sleep, post-traumatic stress and substance abuse, said Steven Schlozman, a child psychiatrist and assistant professor at Harvard Medical School.14

In a spring 2018 survey conducted by the Pew Research Center, a Washington research organization, 57 percent of teen respondents, ages 13 to 17, said they worried that a shooting could happen at their school.15

However, Michael Dorn, executive director of Safe Havens International, a Georgia-based school security organization, says gun violence remains a relatively rare risk for the 55 million students attending K-12 schools in the United States. “People being hit by vehicles in school parking lots cause nine times as many deaths as active shooters,” he says. More common safety concerns at school include bullying, fights, gang violence and suicides, he says.

Klinger of The Educator’s School Safety Network complains that school resources are “being siphoned off to things that are just patently ridiculous,” such as bulletproof whiteboards. And privacy experts are worried about the increased surveillance of students’ social media.
no evidence that they reduce violence. Rather than spending “hundreds of millions of dollars . . . to harden schools,” the researchers said, schools should “expand their mental health services,” which are critical to reducing youth violence and self-harm.18

Mental health care for U.S. schoolchildren is “grossly understaffed,” says Cathy Paine, a school psychologist in Oregon who directs the National Association of School Psychologists’ crisis response team. Most school counselors are responsible for twice as many students as the association says is reasonable.19

“It’s easier to change the door locks than to hire a counselor,” says Paine, “and it’s visible to everyone that you’ve done something.”

Mass shootings create many more victims than those who are shot or wounded, she adds. Two Parkland survivors have killed themselves since last year’s shooting, as has the father of one of the 20 children killed in the December 2012 shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Conn.20

Parkland survivor Ryan Deitsch, 19, says students have not received enough after-care from counselors, who he says are “trying to reaffirm normalcy.” But, he insists, “you can’t do that in this situation. You can’t swallow grief. It doesn’t go down well.”

As educators, law enforcement officials and lawmakers discuss how to deal with the increase in gun-related school violence, here are some of the questions being debated:

**Should teachers or other school personnel be armed?**

Sixteen-year-old Luke Woodham had shot and killed two fellow students and wounded seven others at Pearl High School in Pearl, Miss., in October 1997, when Assistant Principal Joel Myrick, an Army reserve officer, retrieved his military-issued handgun from his car and captured Woodham, potentially preventing further bloodshed.
Proponents of arming school personnel cite Myrick’s actions as an example of why such a strategy is needed, especially when school resource officers or police are not available.

Gun violence researcher and author John Lott, who promotes gun-rights policies and heads the nonprofit Crime Prevention Research Center in Swarthmore, Pa., noted that Myrick had to park a considerable distance from the school because of laws prohibiting guns on school properties. “Who knows what would have happened if he hadn’t had to run [so far] to get his gun?” said Lott, implying that Myrick might have been able to stop the shooting earlier.21

In addition, wrote Ari Armstrong, a senior fellow at the Independence Institute, a Colorado-based think tank, having armed personnel on school grounds could deter shooters. “If Luke Woodham had expected to face several armed adults, he may never have even tried to attack the high school in the first place,” he wrote in a blog on a gun-rights website.22

Trump, who supports arming trained teachers and staff, has tweeted that arming teachers is “a big & very inexpensive deterrent.”23

But Myrick said in 2018 that he does not believe teachers should be armed. “Teachers have to teach, and that’s what they should be doing.” Myrick told The New York Times, adding that he suffered severe stress and nightmares for six months after the incident. He favors placing trained, armed personnel, such as retired police officers, in schools instead.24

Support for arming teachers or other school staff splits largely along partisan lines. A 2018 Pew poll found that 43 percent of Americans favored allowing teachers and officials to carry guns in K-12 schools. But only 22 percent of Democrats or those leaning Democratic supported the idea, compared with 69 percent of Republicans and Republican-leaning respondents.25

Teachers overwhelmingly reject the idea: In a 2018 nationwide poll of 1,000 educators, 74 percent opposed arming teachers, according to the National Education Association, the nation’s largest teachers union. Other opponents include the National Association of School Resource Officers, the National Association of School Psychologists and the National Association of Secondary School Principals.26

State education departments say it is difficult to know how many districts are currently arming their teachers or staff, and in what capacity, because it is done without their knowledge or input. A recent investigation by the New York-based investigative news service Vice News attempted to address this question.

Since the Parkland shooting, at least 215 U.S. school districts have adopted policies to arm teachers or staff, bringing to 466 the number of the nation’s 13,000 school districts that allow armed school staff, Vice News reported in January. Nineteen states allowed districts to arm their personnel as of January, up from 14 a year ago, Vice reported. Since then, Florida enacted a law allowing

### Most States Limit Guns in School to Security Personnel

A majority of U.S. states — at least 30, plus the District of Columbia — allow school security personnel to carry weapons on school grounds, and about eight states permit school employees other than security personnel to possess a weapon on school grounds if they meet certain criteria. About 11 states allow those with a concealed-carry permit to have a gun on school property. About 24 states empower school districts or boards to set their own policies on weapons possession.

**State Policies on Armed School Personnel, as of Feb. 25, 2019**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Policy Type</th>
<th>Estimated Number of States</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School security personnel can possess weapons in schools</td>
<td>30 and the District of Columbia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other school employees can possess weapons in schools (typically only if they meet certain criteria)</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School districts or boards can decide whether to allow weapons in school</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concealed-carry permit holders are allowed to possess weapons in schools</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: The Education Commission of the States reviewed state statutes for language that explicitly allows weapons in schools and addresses who may carry them. If no language is found in a state law specifically addressing the issue, the state is counted as a “no.” The figures do not reflect actions taken by state legislatures after Feb. 25.


---

Copyright ©2020 by SAGE Publications, Inc.
This work may not be reproduced or distributed in any form or by any means without express written permission of the publisher.
teachers to be armed, and similar legislation is pending in Nebraska and North Carolina.27

Vice’s numbers differ from those of the Education Commission of the States because school districts are not always required to report to state education departments when they arm teachers, Vice reported. When it comes to the number of districts with armed teachers, “There’s more that we don’t know than what we do know,” said Jennifer Thomsen, policy director at the Education Commission of the States.28

The 1990 Gun-Free School Zones Act, which prohibits guns within 1,000 feet of schools, allows districts to make exceptions for trained personnel.29

In 2018, shortly after the Parkland shooting, Florida lawmakers voted to allow trained, nonteaching staff to carry weapons. Then this spring, that Legislature enacted a law to allow teachers to carry weapons, following a recommendation by a state commission that investigated the Parkland shooting.30

Pinellas County Sheriff Bob Gualtieri, who headed the Parkland commission, said the panel’s work changed his mind about arming teachers. “The reality is that if someone else in that school had [had] a gun, it could have saved kids’ lives,” he said.31

Some of Parkland’s student survivors, parents and teachers opposed the Florida measure. Florida Democratic Rep. Shevrin D. Jones, who is black, raised a concern that has been echoed in other states: that minority students could be unduly targeted by armed white teachers who may have an unconscious bias toward minority students. Studies have shown that schools discipline and expel black students at disproportionately high rates. Jones unsuccessfully tried to get legislators to amend the Florida bill to require teachers to undergo implicit bias training before being armed.32

Jillian Peterson, an assistant professor of criminology at Hamline University in Minnesota who studies mass shooters, also argues that arming teachers will not deter school shooters, almost all of whom are suicidal, she says. “If you think of these [shootings] as suicides, where someone wants to die, then all the normal deterrent strategies go out the window,” she says.

Nonetheless, public schools in Clarksville, Ark., have been arming school staff since 2013, shortly after the Sandy Hook shooting, says Superintendent David Hopkins. “We wanted to have something in place as a deterrent and also a response, if needed,” says Hopkins.

“Some people just get foam-at-the-mouth mad about arming school people,” says Hopkins, who added that he wished people would “take a breath” and realize that some teachers “can be responsible and do a lot of good in a bad situation if needed.”

Some small, rural school districts have opted to arm staff because they are located far from police or other first responders.33 That is not an issue in Clarksville, but Hopkins says he wanted defenders on hand because shootings take only “a matter of minutes.” Expense also was a factor, he says, noting that his team of 20 armed staffers costs less than hiring a full-time resource officer (the district has a part-time resource officer). A resource officer is a school-based law enforcement officer who typically is armed.

But research shows that while arming teachers or janitors saves money, “having civilians carry guns in schools is unlikely to prevent an active shooter and creates serious dangers on a day-to-day basis,” said Adam Skaggs, chief counsel at the Giffords Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence, a San Francisco-based group that provides legal assistance to gun control advocates. The law center is part of the Giffords gun control group co-founded by former U.S. Rep. Gabby Giffords, a Democrat who was shot in 2011 at a constituent event in Arizona.34

Teachers and other school staff do not have the training or focus of a full-time law enforcement officer and even highly trained police officers overreact in high-stress situations, say opponents such as Skaggs. Armed teachers, they say, could mistakenly shoot an innocent student during a crisis or accidentally fire their gun and injure someone during regular activities. The Giffords center has recorded more than 65 incidents of accidental mishandling of guns in schools.35

Insurers in some states have balked at providing liability coverage for districts that allow school personnel to be armed. But other states, such as Texas and Arkansas, which have strong laws protecting government entities from lawsuits, have been able to secure insurance.36

School safety expert Klinger says arming teachers is ineffective, can cause other problems and can lead districts to ignore other safety measures.
They arm teachers and call it a day,” Klinger says, but “arming teachers is not an ‘all-hazard’ response.”

Should schools do more to identify students at risk of committing violence?

For the past year, the Russellville School System in Pope County, Ark., has been monitoring students’ public Facebook, Twitter and Instagram feeds, using a service called Social Sentinel. The service scans online texts for keywords and evaluates slang, abbreviations, photos and emojis to alert the district of references to guns, bombs or suicide.

Social Sentinel does not invade students’ privacy, says Superintendent Mark Gotcher, because it only monitors public posts that indicate some connection to the school or community.

The district, which serves about 5,200 students, was the first of 38 in Arkansas to hire Social Sentinel, which costs the district $18,000 annually, Gotcher says. Costs are based on the size of the student population, he says.

The software’s biggest success for Russellville so far, says Gotcher, was not in preventing a violent threat but in alerting the district that a former student was making online comments about suicide, enabling Gotcher to intervene. “We look at it somewhat like an insurance policy,” Gotcher says. While he hopes no serious threats arise, the software “gives you another layer of protection.”

Amelia Vance, director of education privacy and policy at the Future of Privacy Forum, a Washington nonprofit that works to protect online privacy, worries about monitoring students’ social media accounts. She called it a significant, new data-collection trend that could create a “permanent record of students doing stupid things online without any sorts of protections on how long that’s kept and who can access it.”

Besides monitoring social media, schools trying to prevent violence use other forms of surveillance, such as cameras with facial recognition capabilities, to help identify potential threats. But experts are split on whether and how to use these technologies, especially given student privacy concerns.

Chad Marlow, a senior advocacy and policy counsel for the American Civil Liberties Union, which defends human rights, warned that a growing number of schools are “actively and aggressively spying on their own student bodies” even though such surveillance “has been shown to have no deterrent effect on violent crime.” Besides monitoring students’ social media accounts, and tracking students via surveillance cameras, schools are remotely accessing students’ laptops and viewing emails or other files sent from a school’s network, he wrote.

The Florida commission that investigated the Parkland shooting called for districts to proactively identify and treat students with mental health issues before they become threats. Nikolas Cruz, the 19-year-old former student charged in the Parkland shooting, had posted disturbing messages on social media that had been reported to authorities but not acted upon.

Both the Parkland commission and the Federal Commission on School Safety have called for changes to federal student privacy laws. For instance, they recommended the Family Education Rights and Privacy Act, a 1974 law that protects the privacy of students’ educational records, be amended to allow better sharing of data between schools and law enforcement.

The Broward County school system, which includes Parkland, recently received a $621,000 federal grant to purchase a surveillance system that tracks students and other visitors on campus using cameras equipped with artificial intelligence and appearance recognition software that identifies a person based on body shape and clothing, then scans for everywhere else that person has appeared on campus.

The Parkland commission recommended that the county establish a database of students’ disciplinary histories, counseling records and other information, such as social media posts that may have threatened violence or self-harm.

Facial recognition technology also is becoming more common at U.S. schools. In 2014, St. Mary’s High School in St. Louis became one of the nation’s first schools to install cameras with this technology. The cameras can compare visitors’ faces against images of people on a warning list, such as expelled students. School President Mike England, who is planning to upgrade the cameras, said some opponents of the system have raised concerns over privacy violations.

“That’s not really my biggest concern,” he said. “I’m going to do whatever I need to do to keep my kids safe.”

Software that analyzes surveillance video is just one of many tools to combat school violence, says Dorn of Safe
Havens International. Deep relationships between students and staff also are important, he says.

Klinger, of The Educator’s School Safety Network, agrees. She says surveilling students can backfire by creating such an intimidating school environment that students are uncomfortable talking about their concerns. Yet such disclosures could help prevent attacks, because school shooters nearly always leak their plans in advance.

“There is a difference in the climate and culture in a school where I am standing against the wall giving you the stink-eye waiting for you to do something bad, versus a school where there is a relationship-based culture,” she says. “My concern is that we see a lot of schools . . . shifting to this sort of adversarial kind of surveillance situation, which all the research indicates absolutely doesn’t work.”

Do active-shooter training drills do more harm than good?

Last December, students at Lake Brantley High School in Altamonte Springs, Fla., heard over the public address system that the school was in a “code red” lockdown. “This is not a drill,” the announcement said.

Panicked students — in the same state where the Parkland massacre had occurred 10 months before — feared the worst. Some cried, vomited, fainted, suffered asthma attacks or texted goodbyes to alarmed parents.

Teachers, too, received texts warning of an active shooter on campus.

Then school officials revealed that the exercise was a drill after all, designed to test real-life reactions. The resulting outcry convinced officials this might not have been the best strategy. In February, the officials ordered that all future drills be identified as such.

Greg Crane, creator of an active-shooter training program known as ALICE (Alert, Lockdown, Inform, Counter, Evacuate), agrees with the decision. “That was wrong on so many levels,” he says. “We have a ‘never run an unannounced drill’ policy.”

Crane defended another type of active-shooter drill that recently caused controversy. Elementary school teachers in Monticello, Ind., attended an ALICE educator training in January in which teachers were shot with plastic pellets from air rifles. Some were left with welts and bruises, and some said they did not know in advance that this would be part of the drill.

But Crane says teachers were told what would happen and given the chance to opt out or wear protective clothing. The sheriff’s department, which ran the drill, “did everything correctly,” Crane says.

ALICE drills and other programs, such as “Run, Hide, Fight,” an active-shooter drill developed by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, have become common exercises for preparing students and teachers to respond to active shooters. Both are considered “options-based,” meaning participants are taught to fight back against an attacker if necessary. Students, including small children, might be told to throw a piece of paper, a can of soup or a rock at an assailant to distract him or her so they could escape, says Crane.

In the wake of the Highlands Ranch shooting, in which student Castillo was killed trying to stop the shooter, experts and school officials are speaking out about the idea of children fighting back against assailants.

Michael Hinojosa, superintendent of the Dallas Independent School District in Texas, does not recommend fighting back. “Too many unknown variables,” he said. “Even well-trained law enforcement and military personnel sometimes do not respond well in these instances.” And the National Association of School Psychologists warned the media to be careful in covering acts such as those taken by Castillo and a student at the

Law enforcement officials participate in an active-shooter drill at North Miami Senior High School in Florida in July 2018. Most states mandate such drills, but mental health officials say they can heighten anxiety among students already worried about school safety.
University of North Carolina at Charlotte, who also died after rushing a shooter. "We caution against unintentionally glamorizing the extremely high risk of confronting an armed assailant head on, particularly when it involves youth," the group said in a statement.50

Kenneth Trump, president of National School Safety and Security Services, a school safety consultancy firm in Cleveland, says the Run, Hide, Fight program was started primarily for a business setting. “It was never intended, especially the ‘fight’ piece, to be for schools,” he says, adding that he finds the idea of children being taught to hurl rocks or cans of soup at armed assailants “insane. I mean, give me a break.”

Active-shooter training grew in popularity after the Columbine shootings. About 95 percent of school districts conducted lockdown drills in the 2015-16 school year, the latest figures available, according to the U.S. Education Department's National Center for Education Statistics. Some states specifically mandate active-shooter drills. This year, for example, Illinois began requiring districts to hold active-shooter drills within 90 days of the start of the school year.51

However, school safety and mental health experts have raised concerns over how such training is conducted.

Dorn, of Safe Havens International, says when he does threat scenario exercises for teachers and administrators, he can tell which have been through active-shooter drills by their frequent wrong answers. Such participants are so focused on finding an active shooter that they forget to do basic things, such as call 911, Dorn says. Or they “shoot” at someone pretending to be holding a hostage — behavior that would not necessarily call for attacking. “They’re like a hammer always seeing a nail,” he says.

Dorn, who often is asked to analyze why school shootings occurred, says he has seen instances in which engaging a shooter has cost students and teachers their lives. He declined to give a specific example, because he says he may be called as an expert witness in upcoming legal actions. He also disputes the call to “run,” which he says can cause stampedes that slow escapes or result in deaths.

Training drills must be done correctly to avoid causing psychological harm, says school psychologist Paine, whose organization has published a guide to best practices for shooter drills. For example, she opposes simulating gunfire or pretending a shooter is nearby.

“We can teach them what to do without providing all that highly sensorial experience,” Paine says. “As one of my colleagues said, ‘We don’t light a fire in the hallway when we do a fire drill.’” She also says drills should always be announced ahead of time.52

Abbey Clements, a former second-grade teacher at Sandy Hook, protected 19 children the day of that massacre. She hid with them behind coats hanging on a classroom wall as the shooting was going on outside their room, the bullet sounds amplified by a loudspeaker that had inadvertently been turned on.

“I understand preparedness,” says Clements. “I know teachers need to understand which exits to use and where to congregate with students. But why do kids have to go through this all the time? I worry about the drills and the effect they’re having on children.”

She also says requiring teachers to decide whether to run, hide or fight puts “a horrible onus” on them, because “there is no right way” to respond. “There’s this perception that if you do things right, you keep yourself . . . and your students alive,” she says. “I’m sorry, but you can’t compete against an assault weapon.”

BACKGROUND

Early School Violence

The first reported school shooting in the U.S. colonies was on July 26, 1764, during what was known as Pontiac’s War between the British and a loose federation of Native American groups. Four Lenape Indians entered a schoolhouse near today’s Greencastle, Pa., and shot and killed the schoolmaster and tomahawked and scalped 10 or 11 children (accounts vary).53

A highly publicized school shooting in Louisville, Ky., in 1853 became an early battle over gun rights. Matthew Ward used a “pocket pistol” to shoot and kill schoolmaster William Butler, a Yankee newcomer to Kentucky who had whipped Ward’s younger brother, a student, for eating chestnuts in class and lying about it. At the time, Northern states were beginning to outlaw carrying concealed pistols, but the South did not. Ward and the teacher scuffled before the shooting, and Ward claimed later that he felt his life was threatened, so he had the right to shoot the teacher. A Kentucky jury acquitted him, prompting protests in the North.54
In March 1891, an unidentified gunman fired a shotgun into a crowd at a school concert in Liberty, Miss., injuring 14. The next month, a 70-year-old man, also using a shotgun, shot at children on the playground of St. Mary’s Parochial School in Newburgh, N.Y., resulting in minor injuries. Motives for the shootings were unknown.55

The deadliest mass murder at an American school occurred in May 1927 in Bath, Mich., a town about 100 miles northwest of Detroit. Thirty-seven students and two teachers died when Andrew Kehoe, a farmer and treasurer of the school board who was reportedly upset over financial losses and rising school taxes, blew up the Bath Consolidated School. Kehoe then blew up his car, killing himself, the school superintendent, a child and three other adults.56

A school official committed a mass shooting in May 1940. Verlin Spencer, 38, principal of South Pasadena Junior High School in California, killed three school officials at his district office during his disciplinary hearing, then went to his school and shot two teachers to death, left another paralyzed for life and tried to kill himself. He served 30 years in prison before being released in 1970. After his conviction, blood tests showed high levels of a painkiller he took for his headaches in his system, which could have caused temporary insanity; but he did not seek a retrial.57

No mass school shootings occurred during the 1950s and ‘60s, although fatal shootings did occur.

On Feb. 21, 1960, the 44-year-old principal of William Reed Elementary School in Hartford City, Ind., shot and killed two female fifth grade teachers in front of their students before killing himself in a nearby field. The motive is unclear, though mental illness was suspected.58

In the late 20th century, the violent crime rate rose to about twice what it is today. Mass school shootings began to share features, such as being random and often committed by disaffected youths. On Dec. 30, 1974, a 17-year-old honor student, Anthony Barbaro, brought a rifle and shotgun to his high school in Olean, N.Y., which was closed for Christmas break. He killed a school custodian and then shot at people outside the school, killing three and wounding 11, mostly firefighters. The boy later was described as a loner and had recorded plans for the attack in his journal.59

On a Monday morning in 1979, a 16-year-old girl, Brenda Spencer, used a rifle to kill two men and wound eight children at the Grover Cleveland Elementary School, across the street from her San Diego home. Spencer’s explanation: “I just don’t like Mondays.”60

In 1989, the first school massacre with an assault weapon occurred on Jan. 17 in Stockton, Calif. A 24-year-old man described as a drifter shot more than 100 rounds into the schoolyard at Cleveland Elementary School, killing five children and wounding 29. The shooting would influence major gun control efforts for the next decade.61

Congress Reacts

Prompted by the Stockton massacre and other school shootings, Congress in 1990 passed the Gun-Free School Zones Act, which prohibited firearms within 1,000 feet of a school zone. The U.S. Supreme Court found the law unconstitutional in 1995, holding that lawmakers had exceeded their authority under the Constitution’s so-called Commerce Clause empowering Congress to regulate interstate commerce.62 The law was amended in 1997 to eliminate the Commerce Clause issue.

Meanwhile, in 1994, Congress enacted the Gun-Free Schools Act, which required states to adopt zero-tolerance policies for weapons at school by requiring that any student found with any type of weapon on school grounds be expelled for one year.63

Five years after the Stockton shooting, a Democratic-controlled Congress in 1994 passed a 10-year ban on assault weapons, a measure sponsored by Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif., who cited the Stockton shooting as a justification for the ban.64

In the 1994-95 school year, the year the ban took effect, homicides at schools dropped to 17, down from 44 in 1992-93, according to the National School Safety Center, a California-based group that provides research and training. During the rest of the 1990s, gun homicides at schools averaged about 23 per year, based on data collected by the Center for Homeland Defense and Security.65

In 1993, The New England Journal of Medicine published a study in which researchers used data from the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to show a link between guns in the home and the risk of violence. Gun-rights advocates began pushing to
eliminate federal funding for any studies that could be used “to advocate or promote gun control.” In 1997, Congress approved such legislation, sponsored by Rep. Jay Dickey, a Republican from Arkansas, which has been interpreted as a ban on federal research on gun violence.66

Democratic President Barack Obama tried to lift the ban in 2013 after 20 first- and second-graders were killed in a mass shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Conn., in late 2012. He ordered the CDC to study “the causes of gun violence,” but Congress refused to fund such research.67

Although scientists decry the lack of federal research on gun violence, gun-rights groups such as the National Rifle Association (NRA) argue that government funds are not needed because private sources finance such research.68 Indeed, studies on gun violence have received funding from nongovernmental and private funds, such as the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, which established the Center for Gun Policy and Research in 1995, funded by gun-control advocate and former New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg.

School shootings involving multiple victims continued to occur during the rest of the 1990s. In March 1998, two boys, Mitchell Johnson, 13, and Andrew Golden, 11, attacked the Westside Middle School in Jonesboro, Ark., with an arsenal of 13 firearms, including three semi-automatic rifles, stolen from Golden’s grandfather. They set off a fire alarm and hid in the woods, picking off classmates and teachers from their hideout 100 yards away as the school was evacuated. The boys killed four girls and a teacher who was trying to protect a student, and injured 10 other children. Due to the boys’ young ages, they were sent to juvenile detention after their convictions and were released at age 21, with their records sealed.69

There were several school shootings in the year before the Jonesboro killings, including the shooting at Pearl High School in Pearl, Miss., and one at Heath High School in West Paducah, Ky., in which three students participating in a prayer circle were killed and five wounded.70

The uptick in school shootings prompted Democratic President Bill Clinton to order the Justice and Education departments to produce an annual report on school violence. Attorney General Janet Reno and Education Secretary Richard Riley released a report in October 1998 that identified three priorities: improving data collection to better understand youth drug use and violence; involving all stakeholders, including community leaders, in school safety planning; and having a broad range of strategies and programs to improve school environments.71

And then came Columbine. The April 20, 1999, shooting at that Colorado high school set off shock waves that reverberate to this day. Two students, Eric Harris, 18, and Dylan Klebold, 17, had spent a year planning a mass bomb and gun attack on the school, hoping to kill at least 500 people. Ultimately, their bombs did not work, but they shot and killed 12 classmates and a teacher and wounded 23 others before killing themselves.72

In response, the Clinton administration created the Safe Schools Commission, which issued its report in 2004, during the administration of Republican George W. Bush. The panel recommended prevention efforts and other steps similar to those being recommended today, such as establishing threat assessment teams at each school, which review incidents of threatening behavior by students or other individuals to identify those likely to target a school with violence. Also, police response to mass shootings changed from setting

On April 20, 2019, the 20th anniversary of the Columbine High School shooting in Littleton, Colo., Marie Sophie and Michael Scott visit the grave of his sister Rachel. She was killed, along with 11 other students and a teacher, by two other Columbine students who then killed themselves. The massacre shocked the nation and focused its attention on how to prevent other mass shootings at schools.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1764</td>
<td>First recorded school shooting in the American colonies occurs during Pontiac’s War. Four Lenape Indians shoot the schoolmaster and scalp and kill children.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1871</td>
<td>National Rifle Association (NRA) forms to improve the marksmanship of potential soldiers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1891</td>
<td>A gunman wounds 14 at a school concert in Liberty, Miss., in a mass school shooting.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1927</td>
<td>A farmer blows up a school and his car in Bath, Mich., killing 38 children and six others — the deadliest attack on a school in U.S. history.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1934</td>
<td>First federal gun law takes effect, regulating machine guns and sawed-off shotguns.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1940</td>
<td>School principal in South Pasadena, Calif., shoots and kills three school officials and two teachers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1968</td>
<td>Congress passes Gun Control Act of 1968, raising age for handgun purchases to 21 and barring mentally ill persons from owning guns.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1974</td>
<td>Seventeen-year-old honor student kills three and wounds 11 in and near his Olean, N.Y., high school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1979</td>
<td>Sixteen-year-old San Diego girl shoots at an elementary school across the street from her house, killing two adults and wounding eight children.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1989</td>
<td>In the first school shooting involving an assault weapon, a gunman kills five children and wounds 29 people at a Stockton, Calif., elementary school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>Congress passes the Gun-Free School Zones Act barring people from carrying a firearm within 1,000 feet of a K-12 school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td>University researchers publish study concluding that keeping guns in the home raises the risk of homicide.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>Gun-Free Schools Act requires schools to establish zero-tolerance for guns at school by expelling students who bring a gun to school. . . . Democratic-controlled Congress passes 10-year ban on assault weapons.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>Supreme Court overturns 1990 Gun-Free School Zones Act, saying it encroaches on states’ rights. Congress approves an amended version two years later.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>Republican-controlled Congress approves NRA-backed measure effectively barring the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) from conducting research that could be used to support calls for gun control.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>Two students at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colo., kill 12 fellow students and a teacher and injure 23 others before killing themselves.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000-Present</td>
<td>School shootings increase amid battles over gun control.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004</td>
<td>Safe Schools Initiative created after Columbine says threat assessment teams aimed at identifying students at risk for violence is key to preventing school attacks. . . . Republican-controlled Congress allows 1994 assault-weapons ban to expire.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>Adam Lanza, 20, uses an assault rifle to kill 20 children and six adults at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Conn. . . . President Barack Obama orders CDC to resume researching gun violence, but Congress refuses to appropriate funds. . . . Some school districts begin arming teachers or other staff.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2018</td>
<td>Expelled former student Nikolas Cruz uses an assault rifle to kill 14 students and three adults at a high school in Parkland, Fla. Student survivors organize March for Our Lives rallies demanding gun control; up to 3.5 million people participate globally. . . . States enact more gun control laws as well as measures to arm trained teachers.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
staff and teachers. . . . Federal Commission on School Safety, formed in the aftermath of the Parkland shooting, supports arming teachers.

2019 Democratic-controlled House of Representatives passes two measures strengthening background checks for all firearm purchases, but the Republican-controlled Senate is not expected to consider the bills. . . . Senate committee hears testimony on merits of providing incentives for state “red flag laws” designed to temporarily bar access to guns by people deemed dangerous. . . . Federal ban takes effect on bump stocks, which enable semi-automatic weapons to fire like machine guns. . . . Florida approves measure allowing trained teachers to carry guns on campus, but some districts say they will not follow it. . . . Two students allegedly open fire at a Denver-area charter school, killing a classmate and injuring eight others (May 7). On May 15 the students are formally charged with first-degree murder, as well as theft, arson and possession of weapons on school grounds.

up a secure perimeter around a crime scene before engaging a suspect to rapid response, in which police immediately find and confront the shooter. During the Columbine shooting, police had waited for the assault to end before entering the school, which the Columbine Review Commission criticized as potentially costing student lives.73

The Columbine killers inspired copycats. Peterson, of Hamline University, says 20 out of 45 mass school shooters since Columbine were influenced by the 1999 massacre. In April 2019, a few days before Columbine’s 20th anniversary, an 18-year-old Florida woman, part of an online community of obsessed “Columbiners,” traveled to Littleton and bought a gun, prompting officials to close or lock down area schools. The woman was later found dead, apparently from suicide.74

Sandy Hook Era

In 2004, a Republican-led Congress allowed the federal assault weapons ban to expire. After the bill had passed in 1994 Democrats had lost control of Congress, and some analysts said the gun control measure may have played a role in some states swinging to the Republican side. The NRA opposed the ban.

In addition, studies of the law’s effectiveness in reducing gun crime showed mixed results. Democrats said that was due, in part, to loopholes that allowed some assault-style weapons to stay on the market. Idaho Republican Rep. Butch Otter said the ban was “nothing more than a sop to anti-gun liberals” that did not reduce gun violence but instead “did real damage to our liberties.”75 Although polls showed that two-thirds of Americans supported the ban, Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist, a Republican from Tennessee, said, “I think the will of the American people is consistent with letting it expire, so it will expire.”76

Two years later, five Amish girls were killed and five injured by a 32-year-old man, armed with a handgun and a shotgun, in their one-room schoolhouse in Nickel Mines, Pa. The shooting prompted David Thweatt, the superintendent of a small, rural school district in Texas, to set up a program allowing trained volunteer teachers and staff to carry firearms, believed to be the first district in the country to do so.77

On Dec. 14, 2012, 20-year-old Adam Lanza, reportedly inspired by the Columbine and Nickel Mines killers, used an assault rifle to kill 20 children and six teachers and staff at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Connecticut after first killing his mother at home. Lanza then killed himself.78

The Sandy Hook shooting provoked public outrage and a new push for gun control. Within a week, President Obama formed a gun violence task force led by Vice President Joe Biden. The task force met 22 times and heard from 229 organizations. On Jan. 16, 2013, Obama announced a four-point plan to reduce gun violence, using the task force’s recommendations. The plan involved 23 executive actions, plus 12 proposals for legislation requiring congressional action that covered closing loopholes in the background check system, banning assault weapons and high-capacity magazines, providing incentives to schools to hire resource officers and increasing access to mental health care.79
Some Countries Act Quickly to Control Guns after Mass Shootings

“It looked like we were going down the American route of gun violence.”

In the 23 years since a man armed with four handguns slaughtered 16 children and a teacher at a primary school in Dunblane, Scotland, no other mass school shooting has occurred in the United Kingdom. The British Parliament banned citizen ownership of handguns a year after the 1996 shooting, with sponsors citing the Dunblane incident to justify the legislation.

“It looked like we were going down the American route of gun violence at the time, and it just wasn't what people wanted,” said Gill Marshall-Andrews, chair of the Gun Control Network, which formed after the Dunblane shooting.

In Australia, gun deaths have fallen since 1996, when the government banned semi-automatic weapons — acting just two weeks after a man with such a weapon killed 35 people and wounded 23 in Tasmania. And New Zealand banned assault weapons a month after 50 people were killed in mass shootings at two mosques in March.

In the United States, lawmakers have been much more reluctant to enact permanent restrictions, with some alleging that to do so would violate the Second Amendment’s guarantee of the personal right to bear arms. Other lawmakers disagree, and the Supreme Court has supported some firearm regulation. A Democratic-controlled Congress enacted a 10-year ban on the manufacture, transfer and possession of certain assault weapons in 1994 — five years after a man with an assault rifle fired more than 100 rounds into an elementary school playground in Stockton, Calif., killing five children and wounding 29. But a Republican-controlled Congress refused to renew the ban in 2004.

A 2017 study by economist Mark Gius of Quinnipiac University in Connecticut found the ban cut school shooting deaths by 54.4 percent. But other experts called the assault weapons ban ineffective. The number of gun homicides in schools during the ban was about the same as after it expired — about 17 per year, on average (although the count varied widely from year to year). However, the record number of deaths in 2018 raised the post-ban average to nearly 20.

The United States leads the world in school shootings, according to a CNN analysis of the period from Jan. 1, 2009, to May 21, 2018. The United States had 57 times the number of school shootings during that period as six other major industrialized nations combined, CNN found. The analysis examined all shootings, not just mass attacks or assaults in which someone was killed, at K-12 schools and on college campuses.

Population differences cannot explain the comparatively high number of school shootings in the United States, because the combined population of those six other countries exceeds that of the United States.

The United States also led the world in mass shootings (defined as those with four or more victims) in all locations, not just schools, from 1966 to 2012, accounting for more such incidents than in the rest of the world combined, according to a study by Adam Lankford, a criminology professor at the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa. Lankford’s data for this time period also show the United States had about the same number of K-12 school shootings as in all the other countries combined.

Michael Dorn, executive director of Safe Havens International, a school safety group that does work in 24 countries, says it can be difficult to compare countries because many do not report school shootings in the same way the United States does. Lankford acknowledges that some cases might be missed. However, he says, today’s social media make it difficult to conceal a large mass shooting. “I don’t think any country in the world could have a problem of the scope and magnitude the U.S. has and be hiding it.”

Lankford and some other experts attribute the elevated rate of school shootings in the United States to high rates of ammunition magazines holding more than 10 rounds and requiring universal background checks. Critics said the law resulted in many owners simply not registering their guns. New York and Maryland passed similar laws in early 2013.
But some experts doubt there is a link between the availability of guns and mass shootings in schools or elsewhere. Gary Kleck, a Florida State University criminologist who has written on the issue, said gun control measures are unlikely to reduce mass shootings of any kind. “Gun ownership in the population as a whole has no net effect on rates of homicide or other violent crime, but it’s possible that gun ownership among high-violence subsets of the population have violence-increasing effects,” Kleck said in an email.11

Besides firearms, another focus in discussions about school shootings is the availability of mental health care. After Germany experienced a series of school shootings from 2002 to 2009, for example, it increased funding for school psychologists, trained teachers to identify and refer children for care and required psychological tests for prospective gun buyers under age 25. The country has not had a major-casualty campus shooting since 2009.12

“A large body of research suggests that fame is revered and sought in America more than in any other country on the globe,” according to Lankford’s study.13 That, he says, could also play a role. He says U.S. mass shooters are more likely to attack schools and workplaces — perhaps, he says, because they view such targets as symbols of their dashed hopes of attaining success.

That desire for notoriety may be catching on overseas, Lankford says. In March, according to authorities, two former students shot and killed five teenagers and two officials at a school in Brazil and injured 10 others before killing themselves. An investigator said later that the attackers hoped they “would draw more attention than the Columbine massacre.”14

“The U.S. exports a lot of things, and there’s this concern about our global influence when it comes to school shootings,” Lankford says.

Even countries without civilian ownership of firearms are “worried about active shooters,” Dorn says. “Every country that we’ve worked in, they are concerned about shootings.”

— Lorna Collier

Also in response to Sandy Hook, NRA Executive Director Wayne LaPierre called on Congress to pay for an armed police officer in every school, and the movement to put armed teachers in schools became more popular in some states.82

Gun control activist groups also formed. For example, Shannon Watts, an Indiana stay-at-home mother and former communications executive, was so enraged by the Sandy Hook shootings that the day after the massacre she

3 German Lopez, “Australia is often held as a model for gun control. That doesn’t make it immune to mass shootings,” Vox, May 11, 2018, https://tinyurl.com/y3lhzx5.
7 K-12 School Shooting Database: Number of killed (includes shooter) by year. Center for Homeland Defense and Security at the Naval Postgraduate School, https://tinyurl.com/y5748dpj.
8 Chip Grabow and Lisa Rose, “The U.S. has had 57 times as many school shootings as the major industrialized nations combined,” CNN, May 21, 2018, https://tinyurl.com/yam4sc3k.
13 Lankford, op. cit.
Designers Urge “Soft Security” Approach to Protect Schools

“We want students to have chances to thrive, not just survive.”

A year after 20 children and six adults were murdered in 2012 at the Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Conn., workers razed the building.

In its place rose a facility with undulating wood and stone that balances warmth and security, according to architects and school officials. A serene, rock-adorned rain garden serves as a barrier against the outside world, with visitors required to pass over footbridges to enter the school. Similarly, classrooms have banks of bullet-resistant windows that let in sunlight but protect those inside.

The first impulse of those on the Sandy Hook rebuilding committee “was to make this school as much a ‘fortress’ as possible,” says Jay Brotman, a managing partner at Svigals + Partners in New Haven, Conn., which designed the new school. But the architects explained to the committee that “if we put children in a fortress, they are going to become isolated individuals cut off from society,” Brotman says, while “opening up schools will do a lot to prevent bullying” and other unwanted behaviors. “What you may think of as secure sometimes works in the opposite direction.”

The new, state-funded $48.5 million school, which opened in 2016, uses so-called soft security systems, which pair discreetly placed security components with comforting, nature-focused designs that experts say help students learn better than in schools with traditional security apparatus. Such designs are a creative alternative to “hardened” school buildings — those that rely mainly on reinforced doors secured with bulletproof glass or framing, security cameras and metal detectors. Some experts warn that hardened buildings may appear to students more like prisons or fortresses than welcoming, nurturing places to learn.

Soft security designs incorporate principles developed in the 1960s, called Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design, that use lots of glass and visibility to give schools “eyes on the street,” says Brotman. “You can get both security and openness.”

In addition, “glass gives the front desk person the opportunity to have visual surveillance, which gives them power over a potential intruder,” says Jenine Kotob, an architect with Hord Coplan Macht in Washington, D.C., who specializes in soft security school designs.

Kotob decided to focus her career on designing schools with soft security elements after experiencing the deadliest school shooting in U.S. history while she was an architecture student at Virginia Tech University in 2007. In that incident, another student shot and killed 32 people, including a close friend of hers.

Kotob did graduate work in the West Bank, where she says she saw schools with “nine- to 10-foot metal walls and barely any windows,” designed like bunkers to protect the children from shootings and bombings. “Students couldn’t imagine their futures beyond the tall, metal barricaded walls that wrap their schools,” she says.

Kotob also has worked on schools in high-crime urban neighborhoods, where she helped create art or sculpture gardens that provide effective buffer zones between students and the street. At Kimball Elementary School in Washington, D.C., for instance, her team enclosed a playground within a courtyard, shielding young children from outside threats. “We want students to have chances to thrive, not just survive,” she says.

started a mothers’ anti-gun group on Facebook. The Moms Demand Action for Gun Sense in America coalition now has members in all 50 states. Bereaved Sandy Hook parents also started gun control groups, such as Sandy Hook Promise and the Newtown Action Alliance.83

Jeremy Richman, a neuroscientist whose daughter, Avielle, died at Sandy Hook, founded the Avielle Foundation to study the brain and violence. Richman killed himself in March.

Parkland to Present

While school shootings continued after Sandy Hook, the events on Valentine’s Day, 2018, in Parkland rocked the nation yet again. Police say Cruz, a 19-year-old who had
Hardened physical security measures can sometimes interfere with learning, said Aaron Kupchik, a criminal justice professor at the University of Delaware. “Research on school safety suggests that too much visible security can create fear among students and be a distraction,” he said.\(^4\)

For example, a survey of 54,000 middle and high school students in Maryland found that surveillance cameras made them feel less safe and more distrusted. “We’ve been focusing on physical safety in our schools, but we also need to consider emotional safety,” said Sarah Lindstrom Johnson, an assistant professor of public health at Arizona State University who conducted the survey and analyzed the results. Her team also counted surveillance cameras and the presence of security officers in the 98 schools they studied to see how they affected the students.\(^5\)

Some security devices being sold by the $3 billion school security industry also may violate safety standards, Kotob says. Door barricades meant to keep an intruder out of a classroom, for instance, can present a fire evacuation hazard.\(^6\)

Since the Sandy Hook shooting, some school districts have installed safe rooms, such as those sold by Shelter in Place, a Utah firm that sells bulletproof, steel classroom shelters. Founder Jim Haslem said his company has installed hundreds of the $20,000 shelters, which can double as tornado or hurricane refuges. Each 5-by-6-foot enclosure can accommodate about 20 students. The rooms typically are located against a wall or in a corner within a classroom, with outside walls decorated to fit the classroom’s decor. Inside, the rooms are lined with benches and can be used in nonemergencies as reading nooks.\(^7\)

As for costs, says Brotman, the soft security approach does not cost any more than the regular cost of building a new school. “The real issue is the retrofits of existing schools,” he says. Districts “are all looking for that magic element that’s going to automatically do that for no money.”

It is difficult to estimate what it would cost all schools to upgrade to these sorts of security measures. The National Center for Education Statistics found in 2014 that about half the country’s schools need $200 billion worth of work just to be in good condition, without security upgrades.\(^8\)

The American Institute of Architects is lobbying Congress to establish a federal design information clearinghouse that school designers could use to determine which safety features districts could afford, says Jim Brewer, the institute’s managing director of government affairs and policy. The association would like to see grants or other funding provided to allow school officials to hire designers who could help them create safe schools that do not feel like prisons.

Brotman also would like to see federal funds made available for those upgrades. “Somebody has to step up,” he says.

— Lorna Collier

---


---

been expelled from Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, opened fire at the school with an assault rifle, killing 17 people — including 14 students — and injuring 17.\(^8\)

Student survivors of the shooting became outspoken advocates for gun control, organizing the first March for Our Lives rally in Washington six weeks later to demand tougher gun laws. Estimates of those participating in the Washington rally and dozens of companion marches in the United States and abroad ranged from 1.5 million to 3.5 million, says Deitsch, a March for Our Lives co-founder.

Also in March 2018, at the urging of President Trump, Congress passed the STOP School Violence Act, allocating millions of dollars for school violence prevention.\(^8\)
Two months later, a 17-year-old armed with his father’s shotgun and .38-caliber pistol killed 10 (including eight students) and wounded 10 at the high school in Santa Fe, Texas.87

In December, the Federal Commission on School Safety issued its findings. Besides recommending that teachers be allowed to carry weapons and more money be spent on hardening school structures, the panel suggested that the media and others not give shooters notoriety or encourage copycats by naming or prominently featuring them. It also recommended rescinding the Obama-era disciplinary guidelines.

Those guidelines had been instituted to address disciplinary practices that had been found to disproportionately target minority students, such as removing them from school for minor offenses at higher rates than white students, putting minorities at risk of entering what Obama and others have called the “school-to-prison pipeline.” 88

Besides rescinding those guidelines in December, the Trump administration also:

• Called on Congress to tighten the federal background check system, via the “Fix NICS” legislation, which he signed into law in March 2018. The measure requires all federal agencies to report convictions, ensuring they can show up during background checks for gun sales made through licensed dealers. It does not close the gun-show or private-sale loophole, which allows people to buy firearms without background checks.89

• Signed the STOP School Violence Act allocating $1.2 billion over 10 years for school violence-prevention programs, such as establishing anonymous systems to report potential threats or troubled classmates; improving coordination with law enforcement; and training school officials, students and police to identify and prevent violent threats.90

• Banned bump stocks, effective in March.91

• Supported pending legislation to encourage states to adopt red flag laws.92

• Encouraged states to allow teachers and other trained personnel to be armed.93

• Recommended that Congress repeal the Gun-Free School Zones law.94

Immediately after the Parkland shooting Trump also called for raising the age for purchasing assault-style weapons to 21 and tightening background checks, but withdrew his support for both measures after opposition from the gun lobby.95

CURRENT SITUATION
Student Efforts

In the 15 months since the Parkland shooting, the student survivors have continued to push local, state and national lawmakers to support gun safety legislation.

The March for Our Lives group has established 200 chapters nationwide that, among other things, oppose efforts to arm teachers and support red flag laws, says Deitsch, 19, now content creator for the group. This spring the group lobbied against the Florida law to allow teachers to be armed, which Deitsch says “will introduce more problems than it will solve” by putting firearms into the classroom setting. Other members of March for Our Lives took to Twitter. “This is an emotional and illogical response to address gun violence by the Florida legislature that will only get more students killed,” tweeted Parkland survivor David Hogg.96

Despite the enactment of the Florida law, Deitsch says the group remains hopeful. “It’s definitely frustrating,” he says, “but overall, we’re thankful for the amount of hope that we’ve seen. All over the country, we’ve seen people who had long ago given up, especially after instances like Sandy Hook in which they saw nothing was done. [Now] we’ve seen those people stick their heads out again.”

The group has lobbied Congress to ban assault weapons, close loopholes in the federal law requiring background checks for gun purchases and restore funding for gun violence research.97 The group also plans to continue its youth voter-registration efforts after record turnout among young voters in the 2018 mid-term elections.

Not all Parkland survivors support gun control measures. Parkland senior Kyle Kashuv opposes restrictions on gun access, asking: “Why would you give away your right to defend yourself?”98

Students supporting gun rights also have been active, holding March for Our Rights rallies and school walkouts in various cities in 2018 and 2019. Stand for the Second, a student-led movement that organized gun-rights demonstrations in 2018, was started by New Mexico high school student Will Riley, 18, in response to news reports that kids were asking for gun control. “And I’m thinking,
\textbf{Federal Initiatives}

In February, the Democratic-led House voted 240-190 to close the loophole in the federal background-check program that exempts gun show purchases from the law. Eight Republicans joined all but two Democrats in voting for the bill, which would exempt gun transfers among family members and temporary transfers, such as lending someone a gun while hunting.\textsuperscript{103}

But the measure, which is opposed by the White House and the NRA, is considered unlikely to be taken up by the Republican-dominated Senate. If it were to pass, Trump has vowed to veto it, saying it places “burdensome requirements” on gun owners and is antithetical to the Second Amendment.\textsuperscript{104}

The Senate Judiciary Committee held a hearing in March on two pending red flag bills, one sponsored by Sen. Marco Rubio, R-Fla., and the other by Feinstein. The bills would provide grants to states to encourage them to authorize police to temporarily confiscate firearms from someone judged a danger to themselves or others, measures recommended by the Federal Commission on School Safety.\textsuperscript{105}

“I really can’t see a reason why we can’t pursue this at the federal level, to incentivize states,” said Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-S.C., chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee. Graham said he hopes to find bipartisan support for the measure. It is unclear when the measure will be considered again or put to a committee vote. The White House has expressed support for red flag laws, despite the NRA’s opposition.\textsuperscript{106}

Rep. Anthony Brown, D-Md., introduced a bill in January raising the minimum age to buy an assault-style weapon to 21. Although the bill is cosponsored by a Republican, Rep. Brian Fitzpatrick of Pennsylvania, Brown has said it is unlikely to be considered by the Senate or signed by President Trump.\textsuperscript{107}

In April, the House allocated $25 million for the CDC and $25 million for the National Institutes of Health (NIH) to study gun violence, but it is expected to face Republican resistance in the Senate.\textsuperscript{108} In March last year, shortly after the Parkland shooting, Congress clarified the language in the so-called Dickey Amendment, which since 1997 had been interpreted as banning CDC research on gun violence. The new language said the CDC can conduct research on gun violence but only if the research
Should teachers be armed?

**YES**

David Thweatt  
Superintendent, Harrold (Texas) Independent School District

Murdering innocent and defenseless children is evil. We must fight the trend toward this malevolent behavior that has begun in our country. Not only must it be battled, but we must use sound judgment while fashioning our laws and guidelines.

In 2007, my rural school district created and implemented the Guardian Plan, which authorizes specific employees to carry concealed handguns to protect our students. The employees are approved by the school board and are trained in firearms. It is an effective plan that protects our students. Data show that mass shooters want soft targets. Our school is not only a hard target, but our Guardian team members are anonymous. Potential school shooters have no way of knowing who they are, adding an element of surprise to our defense.

The Gun-Free School Zones Act of 1990, by contrast, is misguided and based on naïve assumptions about firearms. The federal law, which makes it illegal to knowingly bring a gun into a school or school zone, has left our children — our most valuable asset — vulnerable and unprotected and has helped lead to a horribly unforgettable series of school shootings.

Schools are not built like defensive fortresses — that was the case when the law was passed, and it remains the case today. Some schools in crime-ridden neighborhoods were and are moderately protected by police or armed resource officers, but in many cases that is in response to threats from known bad actors, such as suspected drug dealers or gang members. Most schools cannot identify specific potential shooters.

The Supreme Court ruled the Gun-Free School Zones Act unconstitutional in 1995, but an amended version lives on and continues to compromise school safety. Americans still believe today that schools are gun-free zones. In one broad stroke, the 1990 law changed the way schools — not just schools in troubled neighborhoods but all schools — perceive their defensive needs and their mental preparation for a possible attack. The law has put children at all schools at risk of attack from within and without by signaling to potential mass shooters that our institutions are unarmed and defenseless.

Guns themselves are not evil, they are just tools. By letting good people guard and protect our children, we can keep them safe from people who would attempt to hurt them.

**NO**

Kenneth Trump  
President, National School Safety and Security Services

Teachers want to be armed with technology and textbooks, not firearms. Yet legislators in several states have seized upon the emotional and opportune contexts that follow high-profile school shootings to advance legislation for arming school staff. Such actions may provide the emotional security that many parents and educators desire, but they do not necessarily provide physical security.

Authorizing teachers, administrators or school support staff to be armed with guns in schools goes beyond the Second Amendment and task school officials with a public safety function typically reserved for law enforcement or professional security personnel. School employees would not only be responsible for protecting themselves but would have to protect hundreds, possibly thousands, of students and others.

This responsibility would further tax already overburdened school administrators by making them responsible for managing a quasi-law enforcement function and forcing them to comply with requirements for firearms equipment, training and qualifications, and for background checks, psychological exams and insurance issues. Arm ing teachers also would add a new level of potential liability and risk management considerations for schools.

Having an armed presence on campus involves much more than giving educators a couple of dozen hours of training on how to shoot, clean and holster a gun. Law enforcement and military professionals train their entire careers to develop the mindset that goes with the overall responsibility for being armed. Police officers assess each encounter they make in the course of their workday to determine potential threats and position themselves for possibly having to engage in a life-threatening encounter. Educators, on the other hand, spend their careers nurturing, supporting and interacting with children in loco parentis — in place of the parent.

If educators want an armed presence on campus, they should hire trained, professional school-based police officers. Some school leaders are quick to point to the cost of hiring school police officers to justify arming teachers and support staff.

But if they truly believe the threat they face requires an armed presence, they should invest in trained professionals. The cost for doing so would typically be a small percentage of their overall operating budget and would likely, in the long run, be less costly than the liability of arming laypersons who lack the training and experience to provide such a public safety function.
cannot “be used to advocate or promote gun control.” However, Congress has allocated no money for CDC gun research.

The Trump administration has discontinued funding for an $18 million NIH research program, initiated under the Obama administration after Sandy Hook, which funded 22 research projects on gun violence.110 Meanwhile, the nonpartisan RAND Corporation is expected to begin providing grants for gun research soon, funded by a $20 million donation from Houston billionaires John and Laura Arnold. And Kaiser Permanente, a health care organization, is funding $2 million in gun-related research.111

Some states also are funding gun research. California is spending $5 million to form the Violence Prevention Research Center at the University of California, Davis, and several other states are considering establishing similar research programs.112

OUTLOOK
Staying Safe

Some experts say they worry about the likelihood of more attacks targeting schools, in part due to what they call the contagion effect. Massive media coverage of school shootings makes it easy to find and spread information about how to conduct such a massacre, warns Dorn of Safe Havens International.113 “The ease of accessing information on attack planning on the internet, combined with the influence of previous attacks,” makes more attacks likely for at least the next 10 years, and probably longer, says Dorn. “We believe we shall continue to see planned school shootings, bombings, arson attacks and other attacks,” he says.

Klinger, of The Educator’s School Safety Network, says she is “very concerned about the inevitability of a serious bomb attack on a school.” Columbine initially was planned as a bombing, she points out, and there have been “significant increases” in thwarted bomb attacks in recent years. The emphasis on active-shooter prevention, she says, means “attackers are going to start finding other ways to cause a mass casualty event — and schools are very, very unprepared for an attack with explosives.”

Some experts predict that the school security industry likely will continue to grow. “Technological gadgets and services will likely grow exponentially over the next five to 10 years,” says Trump, of the National School Safety and Security Services. However, “their applicability to pre-K-12 school settings will likely continue to be hit or miss, at best.”

While some security products can help make schools safer, he says, shootings and other major attacks on schools generally are the result of failures of people, policies, procedures and systems — not security hardware or technology.

Dorn says he hopes experts will determine which technologies and behavioral prevention approaches work best and combine those strategies to protect schools. School officials, however, must adopt a balanced approach, he says, focusing on both physical security and mental health efforts.

Dorn also points out that news reports of school violence can give Americans a skewed perspective. The likelihood of being a victim of a school shooting, much less a mass shooting, is still remote, he says. Although American students may be at higher risk of being a victim of a mass shooting at school than students in other countries, the risk is statistically still extremely low.

The challenge ahead, he says, is making sure they stay safe.
NOTES


6. “K-12 School Shooting Database: Incidents by Year: 2019,” *op. cit.* Also see Allie Nicodemo and Lia Petronio, “Schools are safer than they were in the 90s, and school shootings are not more common than they used to be, researchers say,” News@Northeastern, Feb. 26, 2018, https://tinyurl.com/y94wu5jx.


28. Ibid.


40. Fussell, *op. cit.*


43. Fussell, *op. cit.*


55. Logan, op. cit.
73. “The Final Report and Findings of the Safe School Initiative,” United States Secret Service and


105. Segers and Montoya-Galvez, op. cit.


A journalist and author of a book about the 1999 Columbine school shooting writes about the students who survived the February 2018 shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Fla., with a focus on their post-shooting activism for gun control.

An associate professor of educational leadership at Ashland University in Ohio (Amy Klinger) and her daughter (Amanda Klinger), an expert in school safety, advise educators on how to deal with school attacks.

A psychologist who consults with the FBI and law enforcement on school shootings dispels misconceptions about school shooters and says early detection and intervention are key to preventing such incidents.

An education professor at Soka University in California presents a collection of essays examining the cultural, economic and political forces that contribute to school violence in the United States and other countries.

An associate professor of criminal justice at the State University of New York, Oswego (Schildkraut), and a sociology professor at Khalifa University in the United Arab Emirates (Muschert) analyze the cultural impact of the 1999 Columbine High School shooting and the legislative responses that followed.

A professor of education at the University of Virginia who has developed threat assessments discusses why they are important in preventing school shootings.

Investigative reporters say efforts to add layers of costly, high-tech physical protection at schools ignore the lack of independent research showing that such steps save lives.

An international news reporter analyzes practices in Switzerland and Germany that helped reduce school shootings, such as emphasizing and funding mental health care programs.

Professors of health education (Rajan) and epidemiology (Branas) at Columbia University say that while research is
unclear on the effectiveness of arming teachers as a response to school shootings, threat assessment programs and reducing youths’ access to guns do help prevent such incidents.

A reporter examines why Republicans in Congress resist approving money to study gun violence, including their arguments that such research could be used to support campaigns to limit gun rights.

A reporter explains that overall gun violence poses a much more significant threat to the nation’s children than school shootings.

Reports and Studies
A report by U.S. Education Secretary Betsy DeVos and three other Cabinet officials recommends several steps to address school shootings — including threat assessment programs, security improvements and active-shooter drills — and says limiting youths’ access to firearms would not be effective.

A joint effort by the statistics agencies of the departments of Education and Justice examines crime in schools and colleges, covering such topics as victimization, bullying, fights and weapons.

THE NEXT STEP
Arming Teachers
Gun control activists urged Florida’s Republican governor, Ron DeSantis, not to sign a bill to allow any teacher to carry a weapon if approved by the school district.

A U.S. Education Department internal memo states that Education Secretary Betsy DeVos has the authority to determine whether federal funds can be used to arm teachers, contradicting DeVos’ previous statements that she does not.

A proposed measure in Oklahoma would end a requirement that only teachers who have undergone 240 hours of training may carry weapons in schools.

Mental Health
Middle and high school students in Harford County, Md., are organizing a student-led group dedicated to diminishing mental health stigma and developing new initiatives in schools, such as social media campaigns to promote wellness.

Arizona students have drafted a bill under review in the state House Rules Committee calling for schools to expand mental health services, say two officials of the Arizona branch of March for Our Lives, a student-led gun violence prevention group.

Despite severe staffing shortages, Colorado will allocate only $11.9 million for general and behavioral health in school districts this year, about one-third of the amount awarded for school security improvements.
Social Media

A type of software is being used by school districts nationwide to monitor social media activity within specific geographical areas and to alert schools when potential threats are made or other signs of danger arise.

Three high school students were arrested this year after allegedly making threats on social media against two high schools in Garland, Texas.

A man arrested for allegedly making threatening comments related to the 1999 Columbine High School shooting on Reddit, a digital social platform, is facing multiple federal charges.

Soft Security

Striking a balance between comfort and safety — minimizing access points and vulnerabilities while ensuring the space is engaging to students — is important in school layouts, says an education editor.

A high school completed in 2014 in Joplin, Mo., was designed to have high visibility, with abundant windows, lighting and glass, to enhance safety and surveillance.

Lou, Michelle, and Brandon Griggs, “These students have developed technology to protect their high schools during a shooting,” CNN, March 26, 2019, https://tinyurl.com/yyjc4jqx.
Two high school finalist teams in a national Samsung-sponsored STEM contest have designed simple door-locking mechanisms to increase safety in the event of a shooting, one made with steel and the other using an electromagnetic system.

For More Information

Everytown for Gun Safety, P.O. Box 3886, New York, NY 10017; 646-324-8250; everytown.org. National group that advocates for gun safety policies, researches gun violence and tracks school shootings.

The “I Love U Guys” Foundation, P.O. Box 1230, Bailey, CO 80421; 303-426-3100; iloveuguys.org. Group founded by the parents of a Columbine High School shooting victim that offers training, symposiums, research and resources in school safety and preparedness.

March for Our Lives, P.O. Box 8929, Coral Springs, FL 33075; marchforourlives.com. Gun control advocacy group created and run by student survivors of the February 2018 Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School shooting in Parkland, Fla.

National Association of School Psychologists, 4340 East West Highway, Suite 402, Bethesda, MD 20814; 601-657-0270; www.nasponline.org. Trade association that provides crisis teams to counsel students and staff following school shootings and offers school safety resources to parents and teachers.

National Association of School Resource Officers, 2020 Valleydale Road, Suite 207A, Hoover, AL 35244; 888-316-2776; nasro.org. Professional association that offers training courses aimed at preventing school violence.

National Rifle Association, 11250 Waples Mill Road, Fairfax, VA 22030; 800-672-3888; home.nra.org/. Gun-rights lobbying group that claims 5 million members and supports arming teachers and making design changes at schools to protect students from potential shooters.
Safe And Sound Schools, P.O. Box 173, Newtown CT 06470; 866-769-9037; www.safeandsoundschools.org. Group founded by parents of children killed in the 2012 mass shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Connecticut; provides information, training and other resources to help make schools safer.

Second Amendment Foundation, 12500 N.E. 10th Place, Bellevue, WA 98005; 425-454-7012; www.saf.org/. Gun-rights organization that says state “red flag” laws pose a potential threat to Second Amendment rights if not applied properly.