VIOLENCE
in U.S. K–12 Schools, 1974–2013
Patterns in Deadly Incidents and Mass Threat

Robin Lambert

A report of the Rural School and Community Trust
March 2013
The Rural School and Community Trust is a national nonprofit organization addressing the crucial relationship between good schools and thriving communities. Our mission is to help rural schools and communities grow better together. Working in some of the poorest, most challenging places, the Rural Trust involves young people in learning linked to their communities, improves the quality of teaching and school leadership, and advocates in a variety of ways for appropriate state and federal educational policies including efforts to ensure equitable and adequate resources for rural schools.

Violence in U.S. K-12 Schools, 1974–2013

Patterns in Deadly Incidents and Mass Threat

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Preface

This special report, first released as a special edition of Rural Policy Matters in March 2013, presents information gathered from some 700 media accounts of specific incidents of violence in schools since 1974.

Among these incidents, we found 80 accounts of mass violence, claiming 155 lives. We found almost as many mass violence incidents that failed or were averted through interventions by other students, parents, and school staff.

Although mass violence events capture more media attention, we found three times more deaths in one-on-one incidents. Overall, students were the most frequent perpetrators and victims of violence in schools. Only in elementary schools did adult intruders constitute a significant percentage of violent actors.

These numbers corroborate other evidence that schools can significantly reduce violence by developing positive environments that engage everyone in meaningful work and help students learn to prevent, resolve, and manage conflict.

The report underscores the need for more and better information about violence in the U.S. and about the practices and policies that will reduce the likelihood that anyone will be victimized at school or school functions.

Since the initial release of this report, there have been significant developments in the national debate on gun violence and school safety. First, several states have introduced measures to increase policing and armed personnel in schools. Our review suggests these efforts will do little to reduce violence and much to increase arrests of students for minor non-violent misbehavior.

Second, there have been several incidents of explosive attacks in the U.S. Our review found more than a dozen unsuccessful attempts by students to set off explosive or incendiary devices in their schools, suggesting explosives might pose a new avenue of potential threat.

Finally, Congress passed no measures with potential to limit sales of guns or ammunition. Many media pundits and politicians cited views of rural residents as a primary justification, so much so that it would seem rural America is one monolith of opinion. We urge a deeper, more nuanced analysis that explores the varied and complex views of rural Americans, not only on guns, but on the many challenges facing small communities.

In this regard, we hope this report helps to bring a rural perspective to policy debates about safety, guns, and violence in the U.S. These are important conversations that need the authentic engagement of all Americans.
For those of us who attended or worked in rural schools prior to Columbine, that watershed moment in American educational history, guns were around us. Usually a shotgun or a rifle. In a truck. In the parking lot. Unlocked.

We were no more afraid of the gun than we were of the kid who owned it.

Rural schools have tended to have some advantages when it comes to school violence. For one, rural schools have been smaller, closer to home, so if a family or a kid were in crisis or just volatile, someone would likely know and might be able to do something to ease the pressure. It’s usually this personal nature that is credited for the comparatively low levels of violence and discipline problems that rural schools have long enjoyed. (See the graph below for school violence data by locale.)

There is a widely held assumption that rural people have more experience with guns. Whether or not that assumption is actually true, many of us know proud stories of the local boy who proved the best shot in his army unit, the girl who can outshoot her father — skills honed shooting skeet and quail out in the field and hunting deer and squirrel and turkey and the occasional boar in the woods.

Experience breeds comfort and knowledge breeds trust. It was usually easy to trust both the good sense and the gun knowledge of the people we knew.
But even in those supposedly simpler times things weren’t always so clear cut when it came to guns. Rural areas of my home state were peppered with hunting lodges, big tracks of woodland and savannah owned or rented by the week or weekend to hunting clubs, groups of mostly men, mostly from suburbs and smallish cities. Lodges often bordered the property of full-time rural residents.

It was the presence of the lodges that caused many residents of rural communities to view deer season with a mix of anticipation and dread. Anticipation for the rituals of preparation, the fun of the hunt, the competition for the biggest rack, the venison stew, the holiday from school that opening day often brought.

And dread that their one degree of separation would evaporate. That one degree was the only distance between almost everyone and the victim of a hunting accident.

It wasn’t the occasional misfire or explosive malfunction or even lapse of judgment that so many rural people feared. Those kinds of gun accidents were generally considered to be in the unavoidable-risks-of-living-in-the-country category, the same category that housed tractor rollovers and highway collisions with log trucks.

What people feared was the stray bullet fired by a high-powered rifle, perhaps a mile or more away, by someone who did not and could not know they were there.

Out in the country the degree of separation was thin and the images stark: the teenager suddenly slumped over the backyard picnic table at a family dinner on a fine fall afternoon; an infant in her mother’s arms by the stove paralyzed for life with a bullet in her brain; a toddler ensconced in a safety seat between his parents driving down an interstate instantly, inexplicably gone; the bullet hole in the tee shirt hanging on the clothesline.

It wasn’t that some of the rural people who held these fears didn’t hunt with high-powered rifles themselves. It was more that they trusted the people with whom they hunted and knew, pretty much, where everyone was. Many of my friends tended, rightly or wrongly, to view the hunting lodgers, whom they didn’t know, as poorly trained, giddy with excitement, disrespectful of the woods and the land and the people who lived there, possessed of expensive weapons they didn’t need for the kinds of hunting they were doing, and likely to be a little bit drunk.

For sure, many out-of-town hunters were oblivious to the homes tucked into coves, perched along creeks, and nestled in clearings just out of sight.

I knew a fair number of rural residents who thought hunting licenses should be restricted until the seeker could demonstrate a level of knowledge and skill with a gun that suggested their ability to use it safely. “Like a driver’s license,” they’d say.
I knew a lot more who flatly stated that rifles that could send a bullet much further than a person could see to shoot should only be allowed on designated ranges.

No one was trying to restrict anyone else’s freedom. And the conversations weren’t complicated by highly-charged ideas about the Second Amendment. I don’t remember anyone ever mentioning the Constitution one way or the other. But the conversations were about rights, stated along these lines: we live here and we have a right to be safe and free from worry about a bullet coming out of nowhere. Because, well, because we are here.

In preparing this special report, we pored through a thousand media accounts of school violence. We included 700 of those incidents, most of them involving death or mass threat, in our report. It was an arduous, frustrating, and endlessly heart-breaking task.

It’s true that kids are far safer in school than almost anywhere else, including their own homes or their parents’ cars. Many, many more children die in violent incidents outside of school than in school. But in some ways that balance makes the school accounts feel even more weighted.

The vast majority of assailants and victims in school violence are kids. Among the many striking aspects of the stories were how few of the kids who committed violence came across in reports as “evil.” There were, to be sure, some kids who planned their actions and some who seemed to have no insight or no remorse about what they had done. But far more common were stories that suggested a distraught kid, an agonizing loss — at least in his mind (and the majority were boys), tragic adult failures, a future perceived as hopeless.

All together we found about a hundred accounts of suicide. A few kids shot someone else first, but most suicides were individual acts of self-destruction carried out at school. A surprising number were kids who brought to school a small arsenal and a plan to “do a Columbine” and instead turned their weapons only on themselves.

Dozens of the stories included real heroes — a teacher who sacrificed her life trying to get kids out of harm’s way, a student who tackled or talked a classmate down, parents who called authorities because they feared what their own child might be planning.

Enough of the stories suggested an assailant who was seriously mentally ill, especially among adults who targeted elementary schools, to make it worthwhile to note the need for more and better mental health services. Lack of access to high quality and consistent mental health services is a long-standing problem in many rural communities and a likely factor is several rural violence incidents.

But most accounts did not indicate mental illness, and it would be irresponsible to suggest that addressing mental illness would be a sufficient way to address
violence. The U.S.’s rate of mental illness is comparable to other countries; it’s our violent death rate that is outsized.

Far and away the most common school violence stories were also among the oldest of human stories: one person gets mad at another, picks up a weapon or throws a fist and in short order someone is dead.

One-on-one violence accounted for three-quarters of the deaths in the accounts that we compiled. It appears that kids’ impulses — rage, pride, jealousy, a real or perceived insult, a desire for self-assertion, revenge — were pretty much the same regardless of the weapon they used. And when students lashed out, people sometimes died.

The likelihood of death in one-one-one incidents, however, varied a lot, depending on the weapon. A little over 10% of victims who died were beaten; another 20% were stabbed or slashed; and 70% were shot. Whether or not the angry kid actually murdered someone depended to a large degree on what was at hand. Guns were not only more deadly as a weapon, they were, for many kids, both nearby and easy to get. In many accounts a student got mad, took a legal gun from a dresser drawer or closet, went to school and shot someone.

In most accounts in our survey, an assailant was known or a suspect was identified. But in a substantial 10% of deaths the assailant was unknown. Almost all of these unknown assailants (nearly 90%) killed their victims with a gun.

As we reviewed the accounts we began to see an interesting connection between these unknown assailants and what would seem to be their school violence opposite: the mass shooter.

Unknown assailants shot into crowds, caught their victims in crossfire, or targeted them randomly in hit-and-run style shootings — sometimes as a real or misidentified member of a rival gang. Unknown shooters rarely seemed to know or target their victims personally, and they disappeared into the distance from which they shot.

The mass shooters, at least those who did not commit suicide, were not trying to disappear. They may have shot randomly, but they wanted, it seems, to be personally identified with their actions.

In both cases, the assailants relied on distance to carry out their intents.

It is this distance that partially explains the impulse to put armed guards in schools, to use a gun to turn distance back into an advantage. We found a handful of accounts of school violence incidents that were ended by someone else with a gun. In a few cases a police officer shot the shooter. Sometimes the arrival of another gun convinced the shooter to drop his or prompted the suicide
the shooter planned all along. There were a couple of cases where a civilian used his own gun to hold a fleeing shooter until police arrived.

There were also accounts of armed officers who shot a teen committing a non-violent crime or whom the officer mistakenly thought had a gun. There were a few accidents. The stories are complicated. Like the unlucky hunters in my home state, these officers did not intend to hurt anyone. The just couldn't see; the distance was too great between themselves and the people they shot.

So much has changed since the days when we didn’t think twice about the shotgun in the vehicle out in the school parking lot. Now we fret that our nephew will get expelled if a shell leftover from a weekend hunting trip rolls out from under the seat of his truck. We worry that our thirteen-year-old will roll his eyes at a disrespectful teacher and find himself in the justice system for insubordination, either kid a victim of the zero tolerance policies that are supposed to protect them from what we fear most.

But the deepest change may be in the national narrative itself.

American school violence was a long way from its birth when two Colorado teenagers shot and bombed their way from their high school’s parking lot to its library. But Harris and Klebold captured the imagination of dozens of vulnerable teens in a new and powerful way, suggesting a twisted glamour and personal importance bestowed by acts of mass violence. The evidence of their particular influence is in the accounts of many would-be copycats whose plans have been averted.

Perhaps even more importantly, those two teens helped deliver into popular American culture a creeping sense that mass violence is so close that all we can do is take individual actions to protect ourselves. The despair at the heart of the narrative of self-protection is easily abetted by a parallel narrative that defines freedom as the right to shoot back and thus secure ourselves against personal threat on the street and in our homes and, increasingly — so goes one thread of the narrative — against the political threat of government takeover.

As we were working on this report, a man killed a school bus driver and kidnapped a five-year-old in Alabama. It was in so many ways a rural story: a dirt road, a veteran, a bus load of K–12 students, a teenage girl leading her younger schoolmates to safety, a person known to his neighbors.

In this incident there was almost no distance. No apparent degree of separation between the people involved. No distance to speak of between the shooter and his victim. An achingly small distance between the boy and his captor in the bunker and the special units, media, and community gathered outside.
And almost no distance between the crisis and the political statements: ugly online comments about rednecks and guns; hateful calls to shoot the captor — a man known to suffer PTSD resulting from military service, and the widely circulated tweet: we don’t need gun control, we need Jesus.1

That tweet reflects so much: the urgency of the politics; the plea of a faithful person in a crisis situation; perhaps, a call to get the politics out of a crisis in which a child’s life is balanced.

The participation of so many people in the politics of the particular situation in Midland City makes clear that a debate about guns is fully underway. At a deeper level, it’s a sign that the way we explain gun violence to ourselves is changing. The narrative of self-protection has lost some of its hold on the popular American imagination, challenged by a Connecticut man, too young to buy beer, with access to a legal stash of weapons that he used in a school that did everything right.

When we began this report we wanted to understand a lot more than we did about the nature of violence in American schools, about how schools and kids are vulnerable, about how events unfold, and especially about factors that reduce the likelihood of tragedy striking.

We knew going in that violence perpetrated by intruders is relatively rare. But we discovered as we compiled incidents that intruders, when they strike, tend to target elementary schools. Only about 10% of all incidents occurred in elementary schools, but close to half of the ones that did involved an adult intruder (or an adult who shot from an off-campus location). Forty percent of adults who perpetrated violence in schools did so in elementary schools.

The situation in middle and high schools is somewhat different. Adults accounted for only about 10% of incidents in these schools. Most violence came from within the schools, from students.

As we have already noted, the majority of deaths resulted from gunshot wounds. It is likely that some of the shooters would have found another means by which to kill the person they were after, but in many accounts it appeared that without a deadly weapon at hand the adolescent moment of rage would have passed without serious injury.

No accounts of incidents suggested that shooters had difficulty obtaining their weapon. Many got them from home. In three of the incidents that we identified, the shooter took a weapon from his police officer father or grandfather and committed an act of mass violence at school.

1 http://articles.washingtonpost.com/2013-01-31/national/36650875_1_hostage-situation-bunker-school-bus
So many kids ended other people’s lives and ruined their own because nothing stood between them and a deadly weapon. No lock. No administrative hoop. Nothing to slow the rush of impulse, the flood of rage, the torment of humiliation. No adult oversight. No distance.

The formal policy debate in the U.S. is focused on who can have access to what kinds of weaponry. But the larger conversation is not just about guns and the right to bear and use them to protect one’s own; it’s about how we understand ourselves as Americans.

As we followed leads on incidents we often found ourselves on some website or another devoted to spinning the political interpretation of the incident. No incident is more politically contested than the 1997 shooting at Pearl High School in Mississippi.

In that incident, a 16-year-old used his brother’s deer rifle to kill two students and wound another seven. He had stabbed his mother to death earlier that morning. Upon hearing the shots, an assistant principal, a man with military training, ran to his car, retrieved his personal gun, then held the fleeing sophomore, who crashed his mother’s vehicle into a tree in the school parking lot, until police arrived. At issue is whether the actions of the assistant principal serve as an example of why arming school personnel is a good idea.

Supporters of the idea contend that the assistant principal stopped the student from continuing his rampage at another school and that he could, potentially, have intervened during the shooting had he had easier access to his gun. Opponents of arming school personnel argue that the sequence of events in the parking lot is unclear and that one possible instance of an armed school official intervening is too little to counter other examples of accidents and miscalculations involving armed school personnel.

Often our investigations took us to websites devoted to pro- or anti-gun regulation. It was on some of these sites that we were forced to confront radical positions about guns. There was no surprise to us when the Southern Poverty Law Center, which systematically monitors the activities of hate groups around the U.S., reported a significant uptick in hate group activity in response to proposed assault weapons regulations introduced in Congress.

This backdrop of extremist activity makes inflated and misleading rhetoric, especially from lawmakers, dangerous. Extreme talk incites extreme action, and angry bullying backs people into corners from which they sometimes respond with violence. Everyone can understand this human reality; it’s been a much-publicized factor in several high-profile school shootings. And everyone can help

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2 http://www.splcenter.org/
scale back the tone of the conversation in the interests of reducing the likelihood of a violent outburst from someone.

If inflammatory rhetoric is irresponsible, then the more-or-less tacit endorsement of some lawmakers for the claim that Americans need personal military arsenals to defend against imminent takeover by their own government is something more. It is hypocritical to be sure; presumably no one is inviting their political opponents to take up arms against them. Much more insidious, those wink-and-nods suggest that the very thing that defines America — its form of government — cannot work.

At the core of American democracy, imperfectly as it is often practiced, are mechanisms for people to help shape policy — the rules that govern us. It’s the basic tenet, “government of the people, by the people, for the people.” Policy gets made and changed and made again. Few people ever get all they want, but then few issues are ever permanently settled.

The gun debate is so heated, in part, because it is a policy debate. It feels scary because the stakes seems so high and the sides so far apart.

Yet this is the kind of hotly contested concern for which our democratic processes are intended. We don’t have to be pushed into one ideological camp or another; we can be freer than that. Our ability to get to a place that makes everyone feel safer, and in fact to be safer, lies in our ability to bridge the distance between the sides.

And for this challenge we have the most American of rights: our right to participate. Any of us, all of us, can take part just because we’re here.

A big problem in school safety is that we have distance all wrong. In many schools, maybe even most, there’s too much distance between groups of kids, between students and adults, between schoolwork and meaningful activity, between where kids are right now and a future that they can see as worth living into. On the other hand, there’s too little distance between kids and crushing judgments of who they are and what they can become; between minor mistakes and irrational consequences; between overwhelming emotion or impulsive decisions and the means to do real harm.

This isn’t to say that schools haven’t taken serious actions to prevent violence. Most schools have engaged their students in monitoring potential threats revealed by their classmates, and students have taken the charge seriously.

For this report, we found about fifty incidents in which an event of mass violence was averted because someone noticed and reported a potential problem. These were not occasions in which a student made a menacing statement or even had a “hit list.” These were students who had means to carry out a significant
act of violence through some combination of weaponry, ammunition, explosives, a written action plan, or an annotated floor plan of the school.

Communicating to kids that threats cannot be brushed off and that school safety is the shared concern of everyone is an important first step. But it is only a first step.

In recent decades, American education reform has been driven by policies that rank and compare schools, judge kids and teachers and schools by single measures — usually test scores, sanction and shame those who fail to meet the standard, and hamstring possibility by punishing any who resist or pursue an alternative vision. In many communities, these policies have forced deadening curricula and over-reliance on competition, sorting, standardization, and punishment. The resulting tensions are as palpable as the atmosphere of frustration and dread that permeates a significant number of U.S. schools.

It seems almost gratuitous to point out that the values of conformity, intimidation, shaming, and stacked competition that undergird current policy are the substance of bullying and ostracizing. But it nevertheless seems important to make the connection given that bullying and ostracizing have spawned the alienation and anger behind many acts of school violence.

We have a much better chance of giving our kids genuinely safe schools with policies that help schools cultivate the quality of their interpersonal relationships and provide schools with the flexibility they need to find the strategies that work in their circumstances.

Personalized schools, which are not the same as “individualized” programs that often leave kids too much on their own, don’t all look the same. But they share common attributes. They make sure everyone has something valuable to do; they reward kindness and inclusion; they rely more heavily on collaboration than competition; and, they encourage creative and personal exploration and expression.

Such schools are not naïve about discipline. They expect good behavior and teach students to manage and resolve conflict. When students mess up, they are required to take actions to repair the damage they have done. Punishment is used sparingly; suspensions and expulsions are reserved for the most egregious offenses; and students are exposed to the criminal justice system only when they have committed a real crime.

There’s solid evidence that the positive climate that results from these approaches dramatically improves both behavior and academic outcomes.

We also need policies that free schools to build productive relationships with their communities. This means, first, that schools need to be in communities where it’s possible for families and neighbors to stake an interest. Schools connected to their communities have a better chance of understanding and
responding to problems and pressures on students early. They are better able to seize opportunities to pool resources to provide supports and services. Most importantly, communities can help create opportunities for students to do school work that makes a difference to people other than themselves. This helps students see their own lives as serious and meaningful. The community is another arena in which a young person can be known, valued, and assisted, those relationships another bridge, another layer of protection for everyone.

Many rural schools know a lot about what it takes to create this kind of environment. They can teach other schools how to use small size as an advantage and how to integrate curricula with meaningful community activity. But not if they are consolidated out of existence or sacrificed to a single measure of what a school is allowed to be.

Those of us who worked in rural schools, not so long ago, didn’t fear the kid whose gun was in the back of his truck — because we knew him. And because we knew him, we trusted him. And because we trusted him, he had faith in us. We could all respect that learning to use a gun responsibly was a coming-of-age rite in many families. And we were all vested in the responsibility.

We won’t go back to the days when kids left their shotguns in their vehicles. That kind of innocence is shattered. There are too many guns, too little knowledge of what causes a person to snap, too much taint in our collective imaginations.

But there is even more reason now to get to know the kid and build the trust between us that vests us all in the future.

While Americans enter what looks to be a long debate about guns and gun access and ammunition clips, we don’t have to sit on our hands in putative defeat about school safety. There are all kinds of productive things to do that have no direct relationship to weaponry of any kind. By getting started, we’ll begin a new narrative, a narrative rooted in strength, the strength it takes to engage across our differences.

No interest group wants kids to die, not violently, not at school or anywhere else. No one wants to live under the constant threat of violence, random or targeted. This is our common ground. This is where we can stand together, where we begin to recognize that our best protection is not from each other but with each other and our shared commitment to our country and its children.

The United States has a difficult history with violence and kids and schools. Yet there’s plenty of reason to hope. And seventy million reasons to act.

And we can do it, because, well, because we are here.

Robin Lambert
May 2013
In the United States, thirteen adolescents are murdered everyday. Eight children and teens die in gun-related incidents. (Centers for Disease Control, 2010, 2007). Almost every year there is some kind of mass shooting in an elementary or secondary school.

In response to these ongoing tragedies, we at the Rural Trust wanted to understand more about the nature of violence in U.S. schools and the safeguards, practices, and polices that are most likely to keep everyone in our schools safe.

Initially, we had two additional concerns. First, we feared that the Sandy Hook incident would promote calls for schools to increase policing in schools and tighten zero tolerance discipline polices. Both policies have been implemented largely in response to school shootings. Zero tolerance mandates strict punishments including suspension and expulsion for many disciplinary violations, including minor, non-violent, and even alleged infractions. School-based policing is highly associated with large increases in the incidence of students being placed in the justice system for non-criminal behaviors that can easily be handled by teachers and administrators.

As a result of these policies, tens of thousands of young people, especially African-American males, have been exposed to the criminal justice system, damaging both their school and life prospects. Such policies have become a serious issue for many of our constituents, especially in the South where, in many counties, race and class powerfully influence opportunity and punishment at school.

Second, we considered it a serious possibility that new policy initiatives might overlook the situational characteristics of schools and the nature of violence that occurs within them. Policies could do a lot of harm and little good if they are not based on clear understandings of whether violence plays out differently in schools than in other settings and whether different levels or kinds of schools experience different types of violence.

As we began our research, we were able to find information on youth homicide and suicide and some information on rates of gun deaths and accidents.

4 http://www.cdc.gov/ViolencePrevention/youthviolence/
The Children’s Defense Fund\(^5\) has very good resources related to a number of risks to children and youth. The Centers for Disease Control\(^6\) has useful information on youth violence. And, the National Center for Educational Statistics tracks school discipline and violence through the School Survey on Crime and Safety\(^7\) and the annual Indicators of School Crime and Safety\(^8\) reports. There are a variety of organizations that promote school safety and youth violence prevention.

We were not, however, able to find the kinds of details about violence in schools that we wanted. As we continued our research we began to realize that much of what we were seeking was in the stories of the events themselves: the back stories of the perpetrators, the circumstances of the incidents, the responses of schools and communities, and how incidents have been presented and understood in the public realm. So we decided to focus our efforts on finding and distilling information from accounts of specific incidents of school violence as reported in newspapers and other media.

For this special report we compiled some 700 accounts of violent events in which someone died or multiple victims were threatened at school. There is much to be learned from the accounts — from their variety, their specificity, and their commonalities. We trust that this report is a valuable addition to the current public dialogue on violence, gun policy, and school safety.

There are, however, several caveats that should be taken into account by readers. The first is that the report focuses on events that occur at school, school events, and while students are traveling to school. But many youth violence incidents with ramifications for schools occur off campus and after hours and are not included in our collection of events. Second, our review of available accounts is not a census of school violence incidents. We cannot know how many incidents never made it into media reports or how many incidents our search processes missed. Further, we found it difficult to identify and document events with fewer victims, particularly those that occurred prior to widespread internet reporting, so we know there have been more one-on-one incidents than are represented in the report. In addition, official figures for the most recent years have not yet been released, so we know that these numbers are also under-represented.

For these reasons, this report is best understood as a journalistic exploration rather than a statistical analysis. Our emphasis is on the patterns and circumstances that run through the stories and on the larger narratives that the stories, taken together, tell. We note that the patterns in our collection of incidents align with empirical research published elsewhere. For example, we

\(^{5}\) http://www.childrensdefense.org/
\(^{6}\) http://www.cdc.gov/
\(^{7}\) http://nces.ed.gov/surveys/ssocs/
\(^{8}\) http://bjs.ojp.usdoj.gov/index.cfm?ty=pbse&sid=8
found that states with relatively high numbers of school violence incidents tend also to have high levels of general gun violence. However, to the extent that we report numbers, we rely on tallies and rounded percentages to convey the most important themes.

One final note. As we have prepared this report, it has become increasingly evident that the United States is in and will likely continue a sprawling and highly partisan national debate on gun violence and gun laws. And it is equally clear that pundits and politicians will attempt to speak for “rural America” and corral or marginalize rural opinion into one camp or another (for example, by attempting to represent rural America as universally against all gun legislation), possibly as a deciding voice in the outcome of the debate.

In this report, as in all our work, the Rural Trust analyzes policy as it affects rural communities and their children and schools. And, as always, the Rural Trust works to bring rural perspectives to important policy issues. In the context of the issue of gun violence, especially, we challenge policymakers and media to pay attention to the complexity of the nation’s rural regions and issues, its vastness, and its diversity.

Most of all, we urge rural people to speak out. The debate on school safety, guns, and violence in the U.S. is too important to be corralled by any organization or political interest. It needs the authentic engagement of all America, especially rural America in all its varied perspectives and experiences.

Read more:
Centers for Disease Control, Resources on Youth Violence
- www.cdc.gov/ViolencePrevention/youthviolence/

Children’s Defense Fund
- www.childrensdefense.org/
- Protect Children, Not Guns (download the report and other information here: www.childrensdefense.org/programs-campaigns/protect-children-not-guns/)

Federal information sources
Indicators of School Crime and Safety
School Survey on Crime and Safety (SSOCS)
- http://nces.ed.gov/surveys/ssocs/
Introduction: Methods and Definitions

In this special report on school violence, the Rural Trust brings a rural perspective to the issue of violence in American schools. We hope this report aids the ongoing efforts of school administrators, teachers, and communities to put both students and adults in safe and supportive learning environments. We also hope that it will provide useful insight for the difficult policy work that lies ahead as the United States grapples with ongoing issues of violence and public safety. And, we hope it adds to the call for more research on the nature of violence, especially in schools and as it relates to children and youth.

For this report we compiled and reviewed some 700 media and newspaper accounts of specific incidents of school violence in which someone died or a mass threat was intended. We relied on media accounts for two reasons:

- As is now well publicized, the United States tracks relatively little data on violence, especially gun violence. The kinds of information we sought were not readily available in easy-to-access formats for the time period we wanted to follow.

- We wanted to explore overall themes in school violence and to gain the kind of insights that come from the particulars of specific events and from the relationships and patterns of those particulars across events.

We found, however, that tracking and sourcing media reports of school violence incidents was more vexing than we had anticipated. There were many more incidents than we had imagined. Leads turned up in unexpected places. We would begin to follow one incident and find another, often in the same school or in a school nearby. We found ourselves facing two challenges. The first was defining what we meant by school violence. The second was determining how to find incidents and organize them in manageable and meaningful ways.

What is school violence?

There is no single definition of school violence. Some descriptions include everything from a scratch with a paper clip to a mass event with many deaths. Some include verbal abuse like taunting; some include social behaviors like ostracizing and cyber-bullying.

These broad descriptions point to the fraught nature of violence itself. One person’s tease is another person’s taunt. Where does one draw the line in the
gray area between a simple playground scuffle and a serious and dangerous beating?

Because of the complex nature of violence and the sheer number of incidents, we decided to focus this investigation on the most serious incidents, those in which a violent death occurred or in which multiple people were injured or targeted. (See “Definitions,” below.)

However, even using death as a concrete measure of school violence raised confounding questions in terms of what we mean by “school violence.” For example, the federal Indicators of School Crime series, which began after the 1997–98 school year, includes all events in which someone dies violently or a body is found on school property. This means that after-hours adult-on-adult domestic or employee violence is included. So is weekend neighborhood violence that erupts on a playground and late-night police chases that end in a school parking lot. But are these types of incidents actually “school violence” if they have nothing to do with students or with school policy?

Another confounding issue was how to address violent deaths that occurred while students were commuting to school, particularly when they were walking, taking public transportation, or riding in a private vehicle.

These questions illustrate the importance of a nuanced look at how violence occurs in schools and how it is reported and perceived.

Finding and organizing incidents included in our review

In order to find incidents of school violence, we relied on multiple sources including newspaper reports, online listings of school violence events from a variety of sources, reports produced by school security organizations, and public data sources. (See “Sources” on page 21 for a partial listing of the most frequently used sources of leads on school violence incidents.)

We included those events in which there was at least one death or a mass threat occurred on campus, at a school event, or while students were commuting to or from school or school events.

Definitions

We divided incidents into the following categories:

Mass Violence Events: Includes all incidents in which a) there were three or more victims (deaths and/or injuries); or b) the event was random (rather than targeted to a specific person), had the potential or intent to inflict serious
physical harm or death on multiple victims, *and* injured at least one person. Unless a perpetrator also killed or injured random victims, we included murder/suicides that were related to romantic interests (current, former, unrequited) in the *Single Event* category.

While this definition is fairly specific, there were still challenges in categorizing some incidents. See “*Scale and Intent*” on page 20 for more discussion of how we placed specific incidents.

**Single Events:** Includes suicides and homicides with one or two victims that occurred during the school day or at a school event. These are further sorted into one of the following sub-categories:

- **On-Campus Events** occurred on campus (including in school parking lots), in school buses and at bus stops, or at school events, during regular school hours, including opening and dismissal.

- **Off-Campus Travel Events** occurred while students were walking or traveling by means other than a school bus to or from school or a school event.

**Threatened Mass Violence Events:** Includes events in which a credible threat of *Mass Violence* was thwarted. We defined “credible” to include both a plan and the means to carry out the plan. To meet our definition, a credible *Threatened Mass Violence* event had some combination of the following: explosives, multiple weapons, ammunition, a detailed plan to execute the act, or an annotated school floor plan. We did not include events in which individuals were accused of making oral threats, having “hit lists,” or posting threats on the internet unless there was evidence the person was putting together a plan and/or taking action to acquire the means to carry out the threat. *Threatened Mass Violence* events are further sorted into one of two sub-categories:

- Events that were discovered before they could be implemented.

- Events that were attempted but produced no injuries, usually because weapons or explosives failed, assailants were tackled or talked down before acting, or assailants shot away from people — usually into the air or ceiling.

**Hostage Events:** Hostage-taking is a fairly common part of a variety of school violence events. We counted hostage events as separate incidents when there were no injuries or deaths.

**Accidental Gun Discharges:** Includes all accidental discharges of firearms, with or without injury. Accidental discharges that result in death are included as *Single Event* deaths.
Scale and intent in the definitions

The primary factors in deciding whether to categorize an incident as a Mass Violence or Single event were scale and intent. By scale we mean how many victims the incident claimed. By intent we mean whether the assailant targeted a specific individual or multiple random victims.

For example, in the 2012–13 school year we included two incidents under the category of Mass Violence: Newtown, Connecticut (Sandy Hook Elementary) and Baltimore, Maryland (Perry Hall High School). In the case of Perry Hall, newspaper accounts suggest the assailant fired randomly in the school cafeteria, injuring one victim before being subdued. In this case the assailant apparently intended and had the potential to claim multiple victims. By contrast, we did not include shootings at Taft Union High School in California or at Price Middle School in Atlanta. In each of these incidents, newspaper reports indicated that the assailants targeted specific individuals. In both cases the targeted victims have survived the attack; therefore, they are not listed in the count of fatalities for the school year.

Unknown assailants

In about 10% of incidents, no assailant had been identified or no information about suspects was given in the account. In many cases the victim was caught in crossfire or hit by a stray bullet. There were some incidents in which intent was not clear. This was particularly true with hit-and-run or drive-by shootings, where it was often not possible to know whether the victim was a random killing, misidentified, targeted personally, or caught in some other kind of action. In these cases we placed the event in the category that appeared to be the best fit based on the actual and/or potential number of victims and other available information.

A note on injuries

We treat injuries in Mass Violence and Single events differently.

In the case of Mass Violence, we included the total number of injured victims. In the case of Single events, we did not. We made this choice to emphasize the magnitude of many Mass Violence incidents and to avoid under-representing injuries in other types of violent school incidents, as explained below.

By our definition, Mass Violence incidents are intended to claim many victims. In order for this report to explore the full extent of each event, it was important to track both deaths and injury victims. Because these events tend to be well-documented, it was not usually difficult to find information about injuries, although reports sometimes differed on the number of people injured.
The problem of tracking injuries was much more difficult in the case of Single events. To meet our definition, a Single event claimed one or two deaths. We excluded injury-only incidents because of their large numbers and the difficulties in identifying and tracking them through media accounts. There was, in some cases, an injury as well as a death in a Single event. However, including those injuries would have had the effect of seriously under-representing the total number of injuries in school violence incidents. Therefore, we excluded all injuries not associated with a Mass Violence event from this report.

**Marginally school-related incidents**

In addition to the 700 incidents we included in our collection, we also noted another 100 or so violent incidents that did not involve students on campus during school hours. These incidents include after-hour adult-on-adult homicides (usually employee and domestic violence); adult suicides; bodies found on school grounds (not by students) with no apparent connection to the school; after-hours neighborhood violence (in a few cases involving school-aged youth) occurring on school grounds or spilling on to campus; after-hour police actions, including car chases and responses to burglaries and other crimes; and other odd events.

We note them here because they are often included in school violence counts. However, we do not include these incidents in our tallies because they did not occur in the presence of students and are not related to school policy or practice.

**Selected Sources:**

In order to compile the collection of incidents, we looked for leads in a variety of newspaper and media sources, including but not limited to the following:

**Federal information sources:**

Indicators of School Crime and Safety

School Survey on Crime and Safety (SSOCS)
- http://nces.ed.gov/surveys/ssocs/

**Newspaper lists:**

U.S. News and World Report
The Telegraph

Indianapolis Star

**School security organizations (resources and school incident listings):**
National School Safety and Security Services
- www.schoolsecurity.org
- www.schoolsecurity.org/trends/school_violence.html

National School Safety Center
- www.schoolsafety.us
- www.schoolsafety.us/media-resources/school-associated-violent-deaths

**Newspaper-referenced Items on Wikipedia lists:**
Violence is not a new phenomenon in American schools. We found reports dating to the 1800s in which students killed someone else in school, often a teacher whom the student thought had administered discipline unfairly.

The nation’s most deadly school violence incident occurred in 1927 in Bath, Michigan, when a school board member bombed the Bath Consolidated School, killing 45 people, including 38 children.

The first mass shooting in an American K–12 school occurred in 1974 when a 17-year-old senior entered his high school in Olean, New York, over the Christmas break and fired randomly onto the street below, killing three and injuring 11.

Major patterns

We found accounts of incidents in all kinds of schools: public, private, charter, alternative, religious; and in all locales: rural, small town, urban, and suburban.

Assailants ranged in age from six to 66. Adult assailants included former students, local residents, and persons with no known relation to the school. A substantial number of adult assailants were reported to be over 30 years old. Student assailants came from a variety of family backgrounds, income levels, and ethnicities. They included honors students and popular athletes as well as students with social difficulties or disabilities.

Accounting for the 700 incidents we identified, we found the following major themes:

Most violent school deaths occur in Single events, usually as part of personal altercations, not in Mass Violence incidents like Newtown or Columbine.

- Three times more people died in Single events than in Mass Violence events, and we note that Single events are under-counted in the report because they were more difficult to research and confirm in media reports.
- Single events account for about two-thirds of all incidents in the report, with mass violence, threatened mass violence, accidental gun discharges, and hostage events making up the remaining third.
**Students, not intruders, are responsible for most incidents in middle and secondary schools.**

- Insiders (students) accounted for nearly three-fourths of all deaths in the incidents we were able to identify.
- Intruders accounted for a little over 10% of all incidents.
- Unknown assailants and groups accounted for a little over 10% of all incidents.

**Intruders target elementary schools.**

- About a third of all On-Campus Single events in elementary schools were perpetrated by adult intruders. Another quarter of Single event incidents in elementary schools were child suicides.
- An adult perpetrated all but one Mass Violence events in elementary schools. Several elementary school incidents, including the one non-adult perpetrator, involved shooters firing at students from off-campus positions.
- 40% of all incidents perpetrated by an adult occurred in elementary schools, although elementary schools accounted for only about 10% of all incidents.

**In some communities students are at serious risk while traveling to and from school.**

- Between 10% and 15% of student deaths occurred while students were traveling to or from school and were not on a school bus or at a school bus stop.
- Unknown assailants accounted for nearly half of these incidents.

**The most common weapons of death are guns.**

- Across all events, shootings accounted for a little more than 75% of deaths. Stabbings/slashings accounted for about 15% of all deaths; and, beatings accounted for about 10% of deaths.
- In Mass Violence school incidents, shootings accounted for 99% of deaths and 76% of injuries.

**The majority of incidents occur in high schools.**

- 70% of all incidents occurred in high schools; 20% occurred in middle schools; and 10% occurred in elementary schools.
**Types of Incidents.**

- *Single* event violence accounted for almost two-thirds of incidents.
- *Mass Violence* events accounted for a little more than 10% of incidents.
- *Threatened Mass Violence* accounted for a little less than 10% of the incidents.
- *Accidental Gun Discharges* with no death accounted for a little less than 10% of incidents.
- About 5% of incidents were *Hostage* events with no physical injuries.

**In-progress events were usually ended by one of the following occurrences:**

- The assailant fled;
- A teacher, administrator, or classmate tackled or talked down the assailant;
- Weaponry malfunctioned or the assailant ran out of ammunition;
- Suicide;
- The assailant surrendered or was wounded or killed by an armed authority.
In-Depth Exploration of Incidents

This report represents some 700 incidents in which someone died or there was a threat to multiple individuals in a school setting. These incidents resulted in just under 600 deaths.

This section of the report presents additional information about patterns in the incidents.

Mass Violence Events

For this report, we defined Mass Violence as those incidents that claimed at least three victims (death and/or injury), or were random or open fire events that were intended to claim multiple victims and resulted in at least one injury.

We found 80 such incidents in U.S. schools since 1974.9 This category includes all the well-known school “massacres.” It also includes lesser-known events with multiple injuries but few or no deaths, incidents that have received far less general media attention. In addition, it includes several events that resulted in multiple injuries or deaths that occurred at school events (like ball games and dances) or while students were traveling to and from school.

If the perpetrator/s of the Mass Violence incident committed suicide as part of the event, the suicide is included in the total death count and not tallied separately.

These 80 events accounted for a little over 10% of all school violence incidents and about 25% of all school violence deaths in this report.

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9 The 80 incidents of Mass Violence identified in this report are available in a chart, presented as an oversize PDF document, at www.ruraledu.org/user_uploads/file/rpm/sv2013-chart_of_mass_violence_incidents.pdf
Number of Deaths and Injuries

| Total Deaths: | 155 |
| Total Injuries: | 448 |

Incidents by School Locale

Mass violence incidents have occurred in all kinds of communities and locales.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Locale</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rural:</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small Town:</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suburban:</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City/Urban:</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Incident by School Level

Mass Violence school incidents occurred in all school levels.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Level</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High schools:</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle schools:</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elementary schools:</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Death by Weapon: 155 total deaths

The overwhelming majority of deaths in Mass Violence incidents were gun-related. In fact, we found only one incident in which victims died from anything other than gunshot wounds. In that event (Costa Mesa, CA, 1998–99), a 39-year-old man deliberately drove a car onto a playground with the intent of killing children. Two children died, and four children and one adult were wounded.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Weapon</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gun:</td>
<td>153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stabbing/slashing:</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (Costa Mesa, CA):</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Injury by Weapon: 448

Many more victims were injured than killed in Mass Violence events. Again, the most dangerous weapon was a gun. In four instances, the perpetrator used knives or machetes, injuring 34 victims. In one event (Cokeville, WY, 1985–86), a man and his wife used guns to take dozens of children and teachers hostages; before committing suicide, they set off a bomb that caused burn injuries to 79 victims.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Weapon</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gun:</td>
<td>76%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stabbing/slashing/other:</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explosives (Cokeville, WY):</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Perpetrator Age, All Mass Violence Incidents

Students, including several who were 13 or younger, were the perpetrators in more than half of Mass Violence events.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Group</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>13 years old or younger</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14–15</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16–17</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18 or older student</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teen, age not given</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adult (18 or older, non-student)</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Police/Other Officer</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There were, however, important differences in perpetrator age between elementary school and middle and high schools, with adult intruders much more likely to target elementary schools.

Perpetrator Age, Mass Violence, Middle and High School

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Group</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>13 years old or younger</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14–15</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16–17</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18+ student</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teen, age not given</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adult</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Perpetrator Age, Mass Violence, Elementary School

All mass violence incidents in elementary schools were committed by adults, except one incident, San Diego, CA, 1978–79, in which a teenaged girl shot onto a playground from across the street.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Group</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>13 years old or younger</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14–15</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16–17</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18+ student</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teen, age not given</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adult</td>
<td>94%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Single Events

Single events accounted for the largest percentage of incidents and the largest number of deaths. Single events are defined as those in which one or two people died. The perpetrator, if identified, targeted victims personally (as opposed to randomly). The Single event category also includes incidents with one or two deaths in which the perpetrator is unknown. In these unknown cases it is often impossible to know if the victim was targeted. Sometimes victims were accidentally caught in crossfire, hit by stray bullets, or misidentified as someone else. In these incidents the assailant did not appear to be targeting multiple victims at once.

Most deaths occurred as a result of gun attacks. We did not track the types of guns used. We note, however, that in many accounts the weapon was reported as legally owned by someone in the perpetrator’s family.

Assailants used a variety of implements in stabbings and slashings, primarily knives of one sort or another, but also machetes, scissors, art tools, screwdrivers, and other items.

Single events are divided between those that occurred on campus, at school events, and on school buses (Single, On-Campus), and those that occurred off campus (Single, Off-Campus) while students were traveling to school or a school event by some means other than a school bus.

**Single, On-Campus:** This category includes all incidents that occurred on the school grounds during the school day, including opening and dismissal of school. In addition, it includes incidents that occurred at school events, on school buses, and at school bus stops.

Violent school deaths occurred on all parts of school campuses — in classrooms, cafeterias, playgrounds, ball fields, hallways, and parking lots. Deaths also occurred at school events, especially ball games, but also at dances, performances, and graduations. Many of these deaths occurred just after the event, on sidewalks and in parking lots, as participants were dispersing.

The Single, On-Campus category also includes suicides. School suicides are a small portion of all child and youth suicides. However, when they occur at school, suicides are frequently committed in front of other students. Suicides that occur in Mass Violence events are counted as deaths in that category and are not included here.

There were about 350 Single, On-Campus incidents. A few incidents were murder-suicides or double murders, resulting in a little more than 350 deaths.
Homicide/Suicide

Homicide: .............................................. 75%
Suicide: .................................................. 25%

Location of Incident

Most incidents occurred on campus.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>On school grounds: (including parking lot)</td>
<td>84%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bus/Bus stop:</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Event:</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Death by Weapon (On-Campus): 443

Guns accounted for the majority of deaths in the incidents we identified.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Weapon Type</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gun:</td>
<td>68%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stabbing/slashing:</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beating/other:</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Incident by School Level (On-Campus)

Most incidents occurred in high schools.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Level</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High schools:</td>
<td>73%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle schools:</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elementary schools:</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Age of Perpetrator (On-Campus)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Group</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>13 years old or younger:</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14–15:</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16–17:</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18+ student:</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teen, age not given:</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group:</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adult:</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown:</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Police/Other Officer:</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Single, Off-Campus Travel: In some schools and districts, a majority of students (mostly at middle and high school levels) do not ride the school bus. Some districts, especially large metropolitan districts, do not provide student transportation to older students. When neighborhoods are violent, this creates a dangerous situation for students. Nearly 15% of deaths in this report occurred off campus while students were traveling to school, not on a school bus. Nearly half of these incidents involved an unknown shooter.
Most Off-Campus Travel incidents occurred in urban school districts. For a journalistic investigation of neighborhood youth violence, we recommend the “Harper High School” episodes, Parts One and Two of the radio program, This American Life.\textsuperscript{12}

### Incident by Grade Level (Off-Campus Travel)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Level</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High schools</td>
<td>88%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle schools</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elementary schools</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Death by Weapon (Off-Campus Travel)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Weapon Type</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gun</td>
<td>72%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stabbing/slashing</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beating/other</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Perpetrator Age (Off-Campus Travel)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Category</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>13 years old or younger</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14–15</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16–17</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18+ student</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teen, age not given</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adult</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Threatened Mass Violence:** In addition to the 80 Mass Violence incidents that were carried out, we found nearly as many incidents of Threatened Mass Violence. These fell into two basic kinds of events. Failed attempts were incidents in which the perpetrator initiated a Mass Violence incident but was unable to pull it off. In several cases, weaponry (including a few incidents involving explosives) failed; in some instances, someone intervened before injuries occurred. There were also several incidents in which the perpetrator fired into the air or ceiling rather than at students; and there were several incidents in which a student committed suicide and investigators later discovered a stash of weaponry or ammunition that suggested the student had contemplated a mass action.

Averted attempts were incidents in which the perpetrator (almost always a student) was in the process of assembling the weaponry and plans to carry out a Mass Violence attack, but their plans were discovered and reported to authorities. In

\textsuperscript{10} http://www.thisamericanlife.org/radio-archives/episode/487/harper-high-school-part-one
\textsuperscript{11} http://www.thisamericanlife.org/radio-archives/episode/488/harper-high-school-part-two
\textsuperscript{12} http://www.thisamericanlife.org/
most cases a classmate, friend, or parent made the discovery. In a few cases, the student posted an online message calling attention to their plans. We included only those incidents in which the student had the means (weaponry and detailed plan) to carry out the attack.

Finally, there were a few accounts of incidents in which there was potential for a Mass Violence event, but circumstances or intent were unclear. In these cases, if a death were involved, we counted the event in the Single category; if there were no deaths, we counted the event in the Threatened Mass Violence category.

**Total Threatened Mass Violence Attempts**

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Failed Attempts:</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Averted Attempts:</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Accidental Gun Discharges:** Nearly 10% of all incidents that we discovered were accidental gun discharges. About 10% of these accidents resulted in death and are counted as Single events. The remaining accidents sometimes resulted in injury and sometimes they did not.

Initially, we noted accidental discharges as they came up in our review of incidents, but we did not intend to include them in this report. Like all injury-only incidents, they are much harder to track through media accounts, so we knew that including them would under-represent the frequency with which they occur in schools.

Ultimately, however, we decided it was important to include information about these incidents for two reasons. First, even though they are accidental, these discharges are a part of the school violence landscape. Although the person rarely intended to harm anyone at school, they often shot themselves or a friend.

Second, many of these incidents involve young children. In some cases the child brought the weapon for “protection,” in some cases as a toy, and in some cases the gun was left in the child’s backpack or other belongings by an adult and the child was not even aware of it.

**Accidental Gun Discharges, By Grade Level**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>61%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Hostage Events:** Hostage taking is a fairly common component of Mass Violence and sometimes of Threatened incidents. We note it because the presence of hostages greatly complicates negotiations with the perpetrator. About 5% of all incidents we identified were events in which someone took hostages but the incident ended without physical injury. The majority of school hostage takers in these non-injury events were students.
SINGLE EVENTS targeted one or two individuals. They claimed three-quarters of lives lost in school incidents. Most assailants (75%) were students. Guns were involved in more than two-thirds of deaths in single events.

MASS VIOLENCE EVENTS created a generalized threat and targeted victims randomly. Mass violence was responsible for one quarter of all violent school deaths. Students were the most common perpetrators in middle and high schools. Intruders were the only perpetrators in elementary schools. Guns accounted for 99% of deaths in mass events.

Violence Begets Violence: Revenge, Copycatting, Triggers, and Threads

 Violence is potent fuel for more violence. That reality was underscored repeatedly in media accounts of school incidents. We were, in fact, surprised by how frequently we saw incidents that were related in some way to a previous violent event.

We found four primary ways in which one incident of violence spurred another.

**Revenge** was the most obvious and most frequent way in which violence replicated itself. Whether the violent incident was a personal tit-for-tat, a neighborhood turf war, or a *Mass Violence* event, the accounts made clear that many assailants wanted to avenge some real or perceived injury or injustice to themselves or one of their own.

**Copycatting** took a surprising variety of forms. In a number of cases, the copycat incident was directly related to a precedent. For example, in 1992 a 14-year-old opened fire in his Napa, California junior high school just two weeks after a 20-year-old former student killed four and injured ten at nearby Lindhurst High School.

A mass shooting in Granite Hills, California in 2001 occurred less than three weeks after a mass shooting in Santee, just a few miles away. A teenage girl in a rural school stabbed a classmate to death; later that year in a rural school in the same region of the same state, another girl stabbed one of her classmates to death.

The first Columbine copycat opened fire at his school in Conyers, Georgia one month to the day later. Almost every year since students have been investigated for planning mass shootings styled after Columbine.

Adults appear at least as susceptible to copycatting as students. The first modern event of *Mass Violence* in an elementary school happened in 1979. In that case a 16-year-old girl opened fire on the elementary school playground across the street from her home. (She had received her gun as a Christmas present.) Within a decade, two more shooters, both of whom were in their 20s, had committed similar schoolyard massacres, shooting onto school playgrounds from off-campus locations. Altogether these incidents killed eight and injured 52 children plus several adults.

In 2000, a 55-year-old man walked into a Red Lion, Pennsylvania elementary school with a machete and slashed 13 children and teachers. A few weeks later, a
32-year-old man carried a machete onto the playground of an elementary school in Anchorage, Alaska and slashed at children, injuring four.

In some cases, the connections between incidents were less obvious, but nonetheless powerful. In 2006, a 32-year-old Pennsylvania truck driver began to assemble supplies and weapons to seize a school, molest and kill students, and commit suicide. Before he had completed his preparations, a 54-year-old in Colorado took a class of high school students hostage, molested a group of girls, killed one of them and then himself. News of the Colorado incident, however, was largely displaced when, several days later, the Pennsylvania truck driver committed one of the deadliest acts of modern elementary school violence prior to Newtown.

There were also incidents where one thing seemed to lead to another. For example, the well-known incident in Jonesboro, Arkansas in 1998 in which two 13-year-olds pulled the fire alarm and shot teachers and students as they exited the school building, killing five and injuring ten, was preceded three months earlier by an incident in Stamps, Arkansas in which a 14-year-old hid in the woods and fired sniper shots at students standing in the parking lot. The Stamps incident injured two and received far less media attention, although it is likely the Jonesboro assailants knew about it.

**Our collection of school incidents suggests that perpetrators of school violence are, in many cases, learning or at least getting ideas from each other.**

**Triggering.** Some incidents of school violence were not so much copied as triggered. They did not directly follow or mimic another incident, but they seemed to occur within a general atmosphere of heightened tension or anger, as if precipitated by a prior incident.

**Threads.** As we organized incidents chronologically and by location, we began to notice patterns between some incidents that had no direct connection.

For example, the sniper incident in Stamps was not the first shooting in that school. And the slashing incident in Red Lion was one of a number of violent incidents in southeastern Pennsylvania schools over several years. Likewise, the incident in Anchorage was also one of a number of injury incidents in that city. An on-campus adult domestic violence murder took place on the same campus several years after one of the rural stabbing incidents. A child committed suicide on the site of one of the playground massacres.

We also noticed that some places appeared more frequently in our collection of incidents than others. Of six accounts of fatal school shootings in Colorado, three occurred in the school district that is home to Columbine High. We found accounts of three school homicides in Tucson, the same number we
found in Phoenix, a metropolitan area nearly ten times larger. These numbers are too small to draw any conclusions, but we note that Arizona is a state with a high gun violence rate.

The correlation between school homicides and general gun violence rates repeated itself. In South Carolina, for example, also a state with high gun violence rates, we found about 20 school incidents, as many as in Ohio, a much larger state, and 50% more than in Virginia, also a much larger state.

**Breaking cycles.** Research in sociology, family studies, and criminal justice makes clear that violent behavior is to a large extent learned behavior and that violence is more likely to occur in social and cultural contexts where it is tolerated or viewed as inevitable. Our collection of school incidents suggests that perpetrators of school violence are, in many cases, learning or at least getting ideas from each other.

The incidents also suggest that one risk factor for a violent school event is having already had a violent incident in the school or in a school nearby.

It is clear that schools cannot prevent all acts of violence. They often have little control over events outside their walls. But our sense of the accounts of school violence underscores the importance of schools being proactive to prevent violence and to disrupt further violence if something happens. Schools, with sufficient policy supports, can create supportive school environments and teach students non-violent ways to resolve conflict and handle aggressive emotions.

The accounts of school violence also suggest the need to help students make age-appropriate sense of violent events when they occur so that the events hold less of the fascination and perceived inevitability that invite re-enactment. Awareness might also help prompt quick response in the event of a copycat action. Schools face a delicate balancing act in this regard, however. While raising awareness might help prevent another incident, giving too much attention to violent events can also make them seem more common than they are and increase student preoccupation with violent activity.

Violence is not inevitable and rates of violent activity are not consistent within or across communities, demographic groups, or cultures. But violence seems to have a cyclical nature and it often escalates. Deliberate efforts to defuse specific conflicts and dial back an overall climate of hostility and blame are key steps toward reducing the likelihood of violent tragedy.

Smart school practices work to prevent tragedy and make intentional proactive responses if violence strikes.
For this report, we compiled media and newspaper accounts of some 700 violent events in which someone died or there was a mass threat in American schools. Our goal was to learn as much as possible from these stories in order to gain insight into the practices and policies that could help protect everyone in school.

It is clear that no single action will prevent all incidents of violence in schools; determined and armed perpetrators have proven capable of penetrating sophisticated security systems and armed guards. Yet there are many things that can be done to reduce the likelihood of a violent event. This section of the report addresses some of the steps schools, communities, and policymakers can take to make schools safer. It is divided into two parts.

In Part I we address strategies that schools, communities, and policymakers can implement to reduce the overall likelihood of violent events occurring at schools.

In Part II we look at separate strategies aimed specifically at preventing Mass Violence and Single incidents.

Part I

Inside: Things Schools Can Do

Schools by themselves cannot prevent all violent events and it is unrealistic to expect them to. However, there are important things schools can do to reduce the likelihood that violence erupts from within the school and to keep minor events from escalating into catastrophes.

Promote a supportive school climate. Many incidents of school violence, both Single events and Mass Violence, develop as a result of negative social and academic environment. Therefore, developing and maintaining a positive school climate is one of the most important things schools can do to prevent violence, especially at the middle and high school levels, where most violent events are perpetrated by students.
Schools with positive climates share common characteristics. They prioritize building high-quality relationships. They are personal. They know and value all students. They make sure everyone has opportunities to participate and to make contributions that are meaningful to the student and to other people. They promote a sense of belonging and identification with the school community.

They create structures that help students to work with and get along with each other. They act to ameliorate intense winner-loser rivalries. They reward acts of kindness and empathy. They discourage bullying, ostracizing, and verbal abuse among students. Students are trusted to live up to the good behavior that is expected. These practices go a long way toward reducing the social tensions and personal despair that underlie many acts of school violence.

Many schools also actively teach emotional self-awareness and conflict management skills. Frequently they use restorative justice systems that require offenders to address the negative consequences of their actions and make amends to their victims.

Positive school climate is associated with lower levels of school violence and higher levels of academic achievement across all student groups. Negative school climate, on the other hand, contributes to poor academic outcomes and increased risk of violence. (See “Resources on School Climate” at the end of this section on page 44.)

**Positive discipline.** Among the most important components of a healthy school climate are positive disciplinary practices.

These well-documented, highly successful systems promote pro-social behavior, teach disciplinary self-management, and require students to take responsibility for negative behavior by repairing the damage their actions have caused.

Students with more serious disciplinary problems receive more intense interventions through counseling, behavior management programs, and family supports tailored to the individual student’s needs and developmental levels.

Exclusionary discipline and criminal sanctions are used only with students exhibiting behaviors that are truly threatening or dangerous.

The Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS)\(^\text{13}\) program has been widely implemented in schools and shown to improve school climate and reduce disciplinary problems, often dramatically.

**End zero tolerance.** Zero tolerance policies have not been shown to reduce violence. In fact, schools that attempt to maintain order through intimidation, punishment, and harsh consequences for minor offenses may actually increase

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\(^\text{13}\) http://www.pbis.org/
the likelihood of violence by modeling retribution and intolerance and by provoking anger in response to inequitable or disproportionate punishments.

Further, zero tolerance programs criminalize non-violent behavior and expose non-violent young people to the criminal justice system unnecessarily. This exposure dramatically reduces students’ chances of completing school, opens the possibility that the student will be physically or sexually victimized while in the justice system, and increases their contact with violent offenders.

Vigilance, not vigilantism. Many *Mass Violence* events in schools have been averted because students and families have noticed and reported when someone has weapons on campus or has revealed plans to commit acts of violence. School safety is everyone’s responsibility so encouraging students to take action in response to a real or potential threat can save lives. When carried out in the context of a positive school climate, this kind of awareness and reporting is understood to be in the interest of everyone’s well-being. Schools must also make sure that reporting itself does not become a form of bullying that raises the risk of backlash.

Circumscribe school policing. School policing is strongly associated with increases in school-based arrests for non-criminal behaviors. To the extent that police officers are used in schools, their role should be clearly defined to protect and support students, not intimidate or threaten them. Use of force should be strictly limited to incidents in which persons are clearly threatened. Students and families’ rights should be clear and recourse for complaints well-established and publicized.

Tend to basic security. Even without extensive technology, surveillance systems, or dedicated staff, many schools could improve their overall security. Such measures include making sure that latches and locks work on doors and gates and that everyone understands which doors are okay to prop open and which doors must remain closed and locked. It also means that everyone knows where to go and what to do if there is a security breach.

Schools should also take reasonable and necessary steps, appropriate to the community, to prevent weapons from getting on campus. Most school deaths occur because someone carries a weapon, most often a gun, onto campus and uses it.

Schools also need to understand their immediate surroundings and secure their physical vulnerabilities. For example, schools might ask: Where would street violence most likely affect the campus and its buildings? Where would an off-campus sniper or shooter most likely position themselves and what parts of
the campus would be likeliest targets? Where on campus would it be easiest to place an explosive device and where would one do the most damage?

Schools that are uncertain about their plans and their physical readiness might wish to consult with their states or with school security organizations to complete an audit to determine where to focus their attention and efforts.

Most schools are part of the social fabric of their communities and cannot and should not be fortresses. But they can take steps that both protect students and promote a shared sense of responsibility for everyone’s safety.

**Outside: School-Community Partnerships**

Schools and communities can reinforce their efforts to reduce violence by collaborating on a variety of activities.

**Connect students to their communities and promote positive life prospects.** Many students need more positive connections with other people and a more optimistic view of their own futures. Schools and communities can work together to create opportunities for students to make valuable contributions in their communities that also help them see their own worth. Those opportunities can help young people forge relationships with adults and other young people that broaden their horizons and help reveal a path to a meaningful and happy future.

**Create venues for positive personal and creative expression.** In too many communities school is a repressive and frustrating exercise in passing tests of rote learning, poorly preparing students academically and leaving both teachers and students angry and dissatisfied. Alternatively, opportunities for creative expression, arts, personal initiative, and collaborative community-building enhance academic learning, promote personal responsibility, and channel energy in productive directions. In addition, they can improve quality of life and economic opportunity for the student and for others. When schools do not or cannot provide these vital learning opportunities, community organizations might step in by creating supports and venues for rich student learning and expression.

**Provide mental and physical health services.** Partnerships between schools and mental health providers can help bridge the gaps between students’ health needs and available services. Schools and local school boards should consider providing these services in school-based clinics or partnerships with community-based or public agencies to make them readily accessible to students and their family members.
Community-based violence reduction programs. Some communities have been able to take action, sometimes in collaboration with local police departments, to reduce local neighborhood, gang, and drug violence. Such actions help reduce the kinds of violence that often spill into schools. Community and neighborhood activities like gardens, arts and cultural events, and festivals promote a shared sense of belonging and personal agency that strengthen communities and help reduce violence.

Reduce access to weapons. Communities may not wish to address local weapons laws and in some states they may not be able to. But communities can take steps to reduce the access of students to lethal weapons, which helps lower youth suicide and homicide rates. For example, they can run campaigns to remind families how to keep guns safely away from children and youth or provide free gun safety training. Communities can call for enforcement of existing laws that limit sales to minors and people with criminal records. And communities can be proactive in communicating that violence is neither acceptable nor inevitable.

Protect young people. The causes of violent behaviors and the circumstances in which violence emerges are complex and can be difficult to address. Far too many teens and children feel that no one, individually or in their communities, is really able to protect them. When kids feel this way they may resort to violence to defend or assert themselves. Active engagement of adults and community organizations in improving safety and violence reduction can help vulnerable youth feel that someone responsible has their back.

Policymakers

Policy is a powerful tool that can create conditions in which schools can act more effectively to reduce violence. Ill-conceived policy, however, can make challenges more difficult.

Encourage positive school climates. Promote positive discipline programs and end mandated zero tolerance discipline. Find ways other than testing for schools to demonstrate academic progress and enable schools to develop more engaging curricula; encourage schools to partner with communities by removing barriers and ending test-score-based sanctions for schools and teachers. Support smaller schools and learning communities, especially where they already exist. Make arts, creative expression, and collaboration part of all students’ school experience. Help make all schools inviting, stable places to work by providing teachers and building administrators the support, leadership, and professional respect that enable them to build a strong and supportive learning environment for students. Make equitable investments in schools so all students have access to educational environments that give them real academic and economic opportunity.
**Promote equity.** School violence occurs in all kinds of schools with all kinds of funding levels. But some schools and communities have many more local resources with which to build personal nurturing relationships and create rich learning opportunities — the kinds of circumstances that help reduce the likelihood of violence. These same communities tend to have more resources to respond to tragedy. State and federal supports should be targeted to communities that need them.

**Increase economic opportunity and social supports.** Young people need to see a future in which they want to live. And just as importantly they need to see ways to get there. Policymakers can help reduce the vulnerability of young people to violence by investing in mental health services, job training, enriched educational opportunities, and transitional support for students exposed to the criminal justice system, gang or neighborhood violence, and drugs.

**Limit access to weapons.** The vast majority of school deaths we identified could have been prevented if lethal weapons were not so easily available.

**Tone down the rhetoric.** Americans are guaranteed the right to say what they think and are charged with the responsibility to monitor government activities. For these very reasons, deliberately inflammatory language is irresponsible. The angry and bullying tone of current debates could increase the likelihood of violent outbursts in response. Further, extreme rhetoric carries the implications of extreme action.

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**Part II**

**Steps to Help Prevent Mass Violence**

The following steps represent some of the actions schools can take to reduce vulnerability to a *Mass Violence* event. Schools can also work with their states, districts, and security firms to determine where they need to focus their efforts and resources.

- Focus on creating a positive school climate that knows and values everyone, encourages kindness and inclusion, provides meaningful work for all students and teachers, and emphasizes good behavior and restoration rather than punishment and intimidation.

- Focus intruder prevention on elementary schools. The majority of intruder events occurred in elementary schools, and almost all *Mass Violence* events in elementary schools were committed by intruders.

- Focus insider prevention on middle and high schools. About 90% of *Mass Violence* incidents in middle and high schools were committed by students.
Deadly violence occurs primarily because perpetrators have easy access to weapons. Find creative ways to limit this access.

Address ways to prevent events that could be targeted at the school from an off-campus location.

Don’t ignore the possibility of an explosive event. The U.S. has not experienced a serious bombing in a K–12 school in nearly a century. But there have been bombing attempts, mostly by students.

Schools that don’t have sufficient local resources should receive priority funding for activities and training to promote a positive school climate and for school violence prevention and response.

Steps to Help Prevent Single, On-Campus Violence

Establish a positive disciplinary system that promotes kindness and teaches students skills and attitudes to prevent, manage, and resolve conflicts.

Provide training in non-violent intervention and de-escalation for all adults. Focus first on middle and high schools, where most Single events of violence occur.

Pay attention to interpersonal relations among students, notice when tensions are building, and take steps to intervene.

Many on-campus events happen in parking lots and at school events. Schools should make sure these locations are well-supervised, especially if tensions are brewing within the school, between schools, and in the community.

Reduce access to weapons and take necessary steps to prevent weapons from coming on campus.

Steps to Help Prevent Single, Off-Campus Travel Violence

Students who die going to or from school or school events are usually the victims of random or neighborhood violence, including drive-by shootings, gang retaliation, and misidentification. Many victims are vulnerable because they do not have a ride and are waiting for someone to pick them up.

Schools in neighborhoods where open violence is a problem need to:

Provide security at the opening and dismissal of school. A number of events occurred just as school was dismissing and early in the morning as students were arriving.
- Provide transportation or escorts for students who have dangerous routes — either walking or on public transportation.

- Pay attention to the concerns of neighborhoods and communities about where their schools are located. Plan transportation routes and site schools so that students don’t have to cross known danger zones to get to school. Make genuine efforts to strengthen schools in place, rather than close them. Research is clear that school closure rarely saves money or improves student outcomes. It does, however, weaken the ability of neighborhoods and communities to create and sustain other valuable organizations and assets.

- Target resources to schools where neighborhood violence puts children and youth at risk.

- Find ways for schools, police, and neighborhood organizations to work together to reduce neighborhood violence and provide safe zones for children and young people.

**Resources on School Climate:**

You can find out more about the importance of school climate and steps your school and community can take to help your school be as positive and supportive as possible for all students.

ASCD (formerly the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development) has a variety of resources, including this report:


The [National School Climate Center](https://schoolclimate.org/) offers research and services for improving school climate, including this paper:


This paper from the University of South Carolina documents some of the aspects of school climate that schools can address:

- [www.ed.sc.edu/scepc/Documents/EOC%20Climate/SCEPC%202010%20SCEPUR%20submission.pdf](http://www.ed.sc.edu/scepc/Documents/EOC%20Climate/SCEPC%202010%20SCEPUR%20submission.pdf)
WHAT MAKES SCHOOLS SAFE ALSO MAKES THEM SUCCESSFUL

CLIMATE CONNECTIONS RELATIONSHIPS

No school can be 100% safe from violence or armed intruders. But communities and schools can reduce the likelihood of violence from within.

COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

Students do academic work that makes meaningful contributions to the community. ● Health services are offered students and families. ● Creative expression is taught and encouraged.


QUALITY RELATIONSHIPS

The quality of relationships is a core issue. ● Students and teachers are known. ● Everyone has valued and valuable work to do. ● Student voice matters. ● Kindness, inclusion, and collaboration are rewarded. ● Safety is a shared responsibility. ● All latches and doors work correctly.

POSITIVE SCHOOL CLIMATE

School culture is based on trust, respect, and belonging. ● Flexibility and personalization frame practice. ● Discipline promotes good behavior and personal responsibility. ● Restitution, not punishment, is fostered.

The Rural Trust report represents a large number of media accounts of violent school incidents. While it is not a statistical analysis, nor a record of all events, it offers a detailed look at patterns in the incidents.

These patterns suggest that common ideas about school violence may not fully reflect realities. For example, media attention tends to focus on mass violence events like those in Newtown and Columbine. However, we found that 75% of deaths in our report occurred not in mass violence events with random victims, but in single events in which an assailant targeted someone personally.

Further, we found that most incidents of violence are committed from within the school by students. The only exceptions to this overall pattern were incidents of mass violence in elementary schools. We found 15 such incidents, which, with one exception, were committed by adults who either intruded into the building or fired onto school grounds from an off-campus location. The one non-adult was a teenage girl who fired from across the street.

One pattern in our report does not come as a surprise to many people: Guns are the weapon by which most violent deaths occur. Nearly three-quarters of all deaths and 96% of deaths in mass violence incidents were the result of gunshot wounds. Further, the accounts of specific incidents indicated that most assailants had no trouble finding their weapons. Many simply brought them from home.

The preponderance of guns as the weapon of choice in school deaths suggests that efforts to reduce easy access of teens and children to guns would help reduce violent deaths in schools.

The most promising approach, however, to reducing overall violence in schools, and thus deaths from any type of weapon, is to improve school climate. This approach runs counter to prevailing education policy of the past several decades.

Beginning in the late 1980s, state and federal education policies began emphasizing test-based “accountability” systems that mete out rewards and punishments based on student test scores. Initially, these carrots and sticks were directed toward schools, and they have increasingly been applied to teacher evaluations and salaries, and even some types of school funding.
The movement toward “standards” brought more standardization to school curricula, which along with the threat of score-related punishments reduced the ability of many schools to develop teaching approaches and assessments tailored to their students and communities.

Competition has been forced as a motivator for improvement in the form of charters, vouchers, teacher compensation, and student and school rating systems.

Harsh discipline programs, including zero tolerance, rely heavily on intimidation and address “problems” by getting rid of them through high rates of expulsion and suspension.

The forced closure of schools in both urban and rural places made many schools larger and more removed from families and communities. It has guaranteed that many students cannot participate in school activities and has forced long and/or dangerous school travel requirements on many students.

There is no doubt some of these policies have led to positive outcomes for select students and schools. But overall they spell a policy environment that severely restricts personalization and flexibility — core features of schools with positive climates. Further, their underpinnings of conformity, shaming, competitive ranking, and addressing problems by eliminating them are the essence of bullying, ostracizing, despair, and backlash.

The Rural Trust joins the call for more and better research on violence, guns and other weaponry, and the behavioral and psychological contexts and consequences of violent behavior and victimization.

It also calls for attention to the research we already have, research that indicates the surest path to safer schools is also the path to better schools. Those safer and better schools are built on a foundation of trust and belonging. They are committed to knowing and valuing each student. They are structured through collaboration, connected to the places they serve, and shaped by high expectations that everyone contributes. They have the resources to support students to meet those expectations. They don’t punish failure, but they do treat it as a learning opportunity.

Better school environments won’t end all internal violence and won’t stop intruders. But they will ameliorate some of the current conditions that drive students to commit violent acts that too often end the lives of their classmates and teachers.
Resources

Centers for Disease Control, Resources on Youth Violence
- www.cdc.gov/ViolencePrevention/youthviolence/

Children’s Defense Fund
- www.childrensdefense.org/
- Protect Children, Not Guns (download the report and other information here: www.childrensdefense.org/programs-campaigns/protect-children-not-guns/

Federal information sources
Indicators of School Crime and Safety
School Survey on Crime and Safety (SSOCS)
- http://nces.ed.gov/surveys/ssocs/

Newspaper lists
U.S. News and World Report

The Telegraph

Indianapolis Star

Chart of Mass Violence Incidents
This chart includes specific information about the 80 incidents of Mass Violence identified in this report. The chart is presented as an oversize PDF document.
School security organizations (resources and school incident listings)

National School Safety and Security Services
- www.schoolsecurity.org
- www.schoolsecurity.org/trends/school_violence.html

National School Safety Center
- www.schoolsafety.us
- www.schoolsafety.us/media-resources/school-associated-violent-deaths

Newspaper-referenced Items on Wikipedia lists

Resources on School Climate

ASCD (formerly the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development) has a variety of resources, including this report:

The National School Climate Center offers research and services for improving school climate, including this paper:

This paper from the University of South Carolina documents some of the aspects of school climate that schools can address:
- www.ed.sc.edu/scepc/Documents/EOC%20Climate/SCEPC%202010%20SCEPUR%20submission.pdf

InfoGraphics from this Report

Printable, full-size images of the InfoGraphics from this report are available on the Rural Trust website:
- Graph: Percentage of Schools Reporting Violent Crime That Occurred at School By Locale (page 4 of this report): www.ruraledu.org/user_uploads/image/RPM_images/RPM15_01_graph_lg.png
Violence in U.S. K-12 Schools, 1974–2013
Patterns in Deadly Incidents and Mass Threat

This special report presents information gathered from some 700 media accounts of specific incidents of violence in schools since 1974.

Among these incidents, we found 80 accounts of mass violence, claiming 155 lives. Although mass violence events capture more media attention, we found three times more deaths in one-on-one incidents. Overall, students were the most frequent perpetrators and victims of violence in schools. Only in elementary schools did adult intruders constitute a significant percentage of violent actors.

These numbers corroborate other evidence that schools can significantly reduce violence by developing positive environments that engage everyone in meaningful work and help students learn to prevent, resolve, and manage conflict.

The report underscores the need for more and better information about violence in the U.S. and about the practices and policies that will reduce the likelihood that anyone will be victimized at school or school functions.

In this regard, we hope this report helps to bring a rural perspective to policy debates about safety, guns, and violence in the U.S. These are important conversations that need the authentic engagement of all Americans.

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