



IMPROVING SCHOOL SAFETY & REDUCING GUN VIOLENCE

Improving school safety and fostering safe communities where our children can live and thrive should be a unifying priority for all Americans. This paper outlines America First principles to improve community safety:

- 1) Adopting school safety best practices
- 2) Improving access to mental health services
- 3) Understanding the relationship between culture and violence

The recent school shooting at Robb Elementary School in Uvalde, Texas, which claimed the lives of 19 young students and two teachers, was every parent's worst nightmare ([New York Times, 2022](#)).

Sadly, the events in Uvalde have become all too common in recent years, now to the point where these tragedies have become identifiable by a single name. Mention the words Parkland, Columbine, and Sandy Hook, among others, and people will immediately know the details of the tragedies that bear their names.

While there has been an uptick in school violence over the past 20 years, the phenomenon extends back to the earliest days of the country, with the first known incident occurring in the mid-18th century and dozens more throughout the 19th century ([Paolini, 2015](#)).

In the wake of these events, community members, public safety authorities, and policymakers have come together to establish a set of priorities and principles for school administrators and communities to adopt to lessen the likelihood that similar tragedies will occur again in the future.

An America First approach to school safety requires a whole-of-society commitment to adopting a holistic view of the issue of school safety and community violence and addressing the root causes motivating much of the violence in our society.

It also requires a culture of preparedness, responsibility, and accountability to help communities develop the proper mindset to mitigate and address these challenges.

When people in positions of authority who are responsible for ensuring the safety of our children fail to take appropriate action in advance of, or during, an act of school violence, they should be held accountable. This includes law enforcement, school administrators and the boards governing their authorities, and parents or guardians responsible for the proper upbringing of a child.

Everyone who plays a direct role in safeguarding our communities and providing a safe learning environment for our children must understand that the proper execution of their respective roles in this effort is not voluntary but rather a mandatory obligation.

THREE PILLARS OF SCHOOL SAFETY

The America First Policy Institute's (AFPI) approach to improving school safety is founded on three core pillars:

- 1) Adopting School Safety Best Practices
- 2) Improving Access to Mental Health Services
- 3) Understanding the Relationship Between Culture and Violence

There is no single solution that will prevent every tragedy. There are, however, a series of policy recommendations that can be adopted to improve school safety outcomes. Fortunately, a number of those recommendations are already a part of the public conversation and have been adopted by many schools throughout the Nation.

A comprehensive set of policy recommendations was compiled by the Federal Commission on School Safety, commissioned by President Donald J. Trump, and released in 2018 ([Devos et al. 2018](#)). The commission's final report outlined dozens of school safety best practices that state and local education administrators should pursue.

The report was followed by the release of the School Safety Clearinghouse, an online repository of best practices as well as school safety assessment tools to help administrators identify gaps in their security protocols and access resources to address those needs ([Department of Education, 2022](#)).

The body of school safety recommendations was broadened by the release of the Marjory Stoneman Douglas Public Safety Commission report issued in the aftermath of the eponymous school shooting in Parkland, Florida ([Florida Department of Law Enforcement, 2019](#)).

Adopting the best of these recommendations while understanding the deeper root causes underlying school violence are immediate steps that federal, state, and local policymakers and school administrators can take to improve school safety outcomes in their communities.

ADOPTING SCHOOL SAFETY BEST PRACTICES

There are several measures that federal and state policymakers, as well as school administrators, can take to mitigate the likelihood of school violence in their communities. Policymakers at the federal and state level, along with school administrators at the local level, should adopt or enhance the implementation of the following recommendations:

Create consistent policies for the collection and sharing of Suspicious Activity Reporting (SAR)

SAR is essential ([Department of Homeland Security, n.d.](#)). When done correctly, it allows for the collection, curation, and dissemination of vital information that can potentially provide actionable intelligence when viewed in the proper context.

In the context of school safety, the basic principles remain. School districts and individual schools should create systems for the consistent reporting of troubling student behavior, shareable in a common platform, to ensure that knowledge of a student exhibiting such behavior is accessible beyond his or her immediate academic environment.

Creating consistency in the process involves establishing common parameters for reporting, along with clear thresholds for involving law enforcement. Once established, with appropriate training for all stakeholders, these common protocols enhance the likelihood that a problem student is identified and proper intervention applied before a potential act of violence.

Keep School Access Points Locked and Attended

In the aftermath of the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School shooting in Parkland, Florida, one of the most immediate and actionable recommendations was to keep school grounds inaccessible to unauthorized individuals by always locking gates and doors ([Florida Department of Law Enforcement, 2019](#)).

If ingress or egress at an access point is necessary, such as at the beginning or end of the school day, those areas should be staffed by appropriate school personnel to ensure no unauthorized access.

Similarly, doors entering classrooms or other areas of learning should remain locked during business hours. Classroom doors that lock from the inside were found to be most effective, according to a [2015 report](#) by the Sandy Hook Advisory Commission.

Ensure an Armed Response by Appropriately Trained School Personnel

The sooner a perpetrator of school violence is confronted by appropriately trained, armed school personnel, the greater likelihood that acts of violence will be mitigated with fewer lives lost ([Barakat and Holland, 2018](#)).

Schools should employ School Resource Officers (SRO)—who are often active or retired law enforcement officers—to carry the bulk of responsibility for responding to acts of school violence; however, SROs can be augmented through a program to train other school personnel in the appropriate handling and use of firearms in the event of an act of school violence.

Recently, the Ohio state legislature passed a bill to ease the requirements to allow teachers to carry firearms on campus by reducing the necessary training time from several hundred hours down to 24 ([Associated Press, 2022](#)). Those who qualify to carry on campus would be subject to an additional 8 hours of annual training. Sufficient and ongoing training is essential to ensuring that those who carry a firearm upon school grounds are prepared to intervene in the event of an act of school violence.

Encourage Former Law Enforcement and Military to Enter the Education Workforce

States can create incentive programs to encourage former law enforcement or military personnel to pursue careers in education following their service careers.

By offering recruiting incentives to applicable individuals, schools can augment their staffing with personnel who concurrently possess the experience and training to enhance the overall school safety environment ([Devos et al. 2018](#)).

Create an Awareness Campaign

States and school districts, perhaps in partnership with the federal government, should provide resources for adopting an awareness and reporting campaign similar to the “See

Something, Say Something” campaign for the recognition of terror-related crime or potentially related activity ([Department of Homeland Security, n.d., 2](#)).

Creating a culture of awareness and eliminating the inhibitions of people to alert authorities about disturbing behavior has an extensive history of success in preventing potential tragedies.

In Cupertino, California, in early 2001, employees at a local drug store photography processing center alerted police after developing pictures of an individual posing with an arsenal of weapons ([Bay City News, 2004](#)).

The tip led the police to investigate the individual, Al DeGuzman, then 19 years old, which led to the discovery of a cache of weapons and the uncovering of a detailed plot to conduct a Columbine-style massacre at De Anza Community College ([Glionna and Trounson, 2001](#)).

DeGuzman was ultimately arrested, and the plot foiled, but perhaps only because of the willingness of the drug store employees to alert authorities.

More recently, in December 2021, police in Florida arrested 19-year-old John Hagins for plotting to conduct a school shooting at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University ([Paschall-Brown and Ciampi, 2021](#)). Police were alerted to Hagin’s motives after receiving a tip from fellow students who indicated that Hagins had made disturbing comments and threats while practicing at the school’s gun range.

When arrested, Hagins was allegedly carrying a collapsible rifle in his backpack along with a large amount of ammunition. Police stated that they believed he was about to go to a gun range for practice and then was planning to head to the school.

Increase Transparency Measure with Parents

Parents have a right to transparency and accountability regarding school safety. Just as parents have the right to know what their children are learning, they also have the right to know how their children will be kept safe. Sharing school safety measures and best practices with parents results in better-informed parents and a more coordinated response if an act of violence occurs.

Encourage Schools to Adopt Technology to Actively Monitor Student Use of School Property

While many schools utilize content-filtering programs to prohibit access to certain websites or inappropriate material by students, [software](#) exists that enables school administrators to monitor such behavior on school-owned computer devices actively ([Sawchuk, 2021](#)).

This technology can alert school personnel to potentially troubling online behavior in real time and enables active, rather than passive, monitoring. This technology may empower school personnel to prevent or mitigate a potential act of violence before it is able to occur.

Pursue Federal Grants under the 2018 STOP School Violence Act

The 2018 STOP School Violence Act, a bipartisan bill signed by President Trump, provides grant funding to states and local governments through the Bureau of Justice Assistance and the Office of Community Oriented Policing Services offices within the Department of Justice to train school personnel, obtain technology, and conduct school threat assessments to better secure and prepare schools from potential acts of violence.

These funds are already available to schools and should be more widely utilized to better implement many school safety best practices.

IMPROVING ACCESS TO MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES

At the root of much of the school violence that has plagued communities in recent years has been the crisis of untreated mental illness—a crisis made worse by the COVID-19 pandemic and loss of connectedness.

In 2019, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reported that over a third of all high school students experienced persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness (Centers for Disease Control, 2021), and 18.8% of students seriously considered attempting suicide (Ivey-Stephenson et al., 2020).

Students suffering from mental health challenges are more prone to missing school, doing poorly in school, or dropping out entirely (Stagman and Cooper, 2010).

Ensuring individuals, particularly youth, receive necessary mental health treatment and have strong personal connections should be key drivers behind any policy effort to reduce the incidence of school shootings and gun violence in society, including the following recommendations:

Provide Resources for Schools to Create a Positive Social Climate and Promote Human Connectedness

Students thrive when they learn in an environment that encourages positive social interactions with one another. According to a 2009 study (Wike and Fraser, 2009), school programs encouraging bonding and connectedness among staff and students were relevant to reducing (Paolini, 2015) gun violence in schools.

The COVID-19 pandemic took an enormous toll on our Nation’s kids, between school closures, online learning, and a pause in extracurricular activities. These disruptions have eroded children’s mental health. The CDC reported that 37.1% of high school students experienced poor mental health during the pandemic, and 31.1% experienced poor mental health in the 30 days preceding the study (Jones et al., 2022).

The same study observed that students who felt close to others at school had a lower prevalence of poor mental health (Jones et al., 2022).

The perpetrators of school violence, particularly mass casualty shooting events, often are withdrawn from fellow students. This was the case (Sullivan, Wan, and Tate, 2018) with Nikolas Cruz, the student gunman who killed 17 people and wounded 17 others at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, in 2018 (A&E Television Networks, 2019). It was reported that Cruz would isolate himself from others at school and that his relationships with family and others were strained.

Fostering a culture of “connectedness” can improve children’s mental health, reducing the likelihood of violent behavior.

Encouraging help-seeking behaviors, building relationships with peers and trusted adults, and participating in community activities can improve kids' mental health and academic achievement while reducing the risk of depression and suicide.

"Buddy programs" can increase connectedness, particularly among vulnerable youth. These programs match volunteer youth mentors to engage with vulnerable youth directly, ensuring that these students have peer connectedness during lunch, recess, and other school activities ([Coon, 2020](#)). A 2011 study found that students with disabilities increased their "interaction with typical peers as a result of participating in a peer buddy program" ([Foster, 2011](#)).

In addition to improving connectedness in schools, communities should encourage a broader culture of healthy engagement with children.

Require School Districts to Establish Partnerships with Local Mental Health Care Providers to Increase Access to In-School Services

As mental health is an important factor in a healthy child's development ([Stagman and Cooper 2010](#)), access to quality mental health services in appropriate settings is equally important.

According to estimates, approximately 16.5% of children under the age of 18 suffer from at least one mental health affliction; however, only half of those children receive professional mental health treatment ([National Center for Education Statistics, 2020](#)).

Within schools, the availability of mental health assessment or treatment services needs improvement. During the 2017-2018 school year, a study found that approximately 51% of public schools offered diagnostic mental health assessment services, and only 38% offered mental health treatment ([National Center for Education Statistics, 2020](#)).

The availability of these services within public schools diminished in smaller, more rural settings ([National Center for Education Statistics, 2020](#)).

Providing access to mental health services is a critical tool in identifying and treating troubling behavior that could be indicative of violence ([National Association of School Psychologists 2018](#)).

School districts and individual schools should work toward broad implementation of these programs so that students most in need can find the necessary resources to address their challenges. No matter the learning environment, whether public, private, or home school, all children deserve supportive mental health programs.

Use Existing COVID Relief Funding to Ensure Mental Health Services are Available

As of May 2022, 93% of \$122 billion earmarked for the K-12 education system within the \$1.9 trillion American Rescue Plan has yet to be spent ([Chapman and Randazzo, 2022](#)). These funds were meant to address learning loss and student mental health challenges due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Local school administrators have until September 2024 to use these funds before they lose access to it ([Chapman and Randazzo, 2022](#)). Waivers and exemptions can be filed; however,

there is an opportunity to meet the urgency of the moment and apply these existing funds toward the build-out of mental health diagnostic and treatment services where needed.

UNDERSTANDING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CULTURE & VIOLENCE

There are large cultural currents that make curbing school violence more difficult. One significant challenge is the glorification of violence in pop culture and the media.

Similarly, the crisis of fatherlessness and its impact on the growth and development of children, particularly young men, must also be acknowledged.

The impact these phenomena have on the prevalence of school violence may be mitigated by adopting the following recommendations:

Federal, State, and Local Leaders Should Keep Focus on Victims

The Federal Commission on School Safety advocated for the adoption of a “No Notoriety” campaign to cease mentioning the names or displaying the pictures of perpetrators of school violence and instead focus on the victims of these crimes ([Devos et al. 2018](#)).

Several past perpetrators of school violence, along with many unsuccessful would-be perpetrators, expressed admiration toward others who gained notoriety in the aftermath of their own acts of school violence.

After Dillon Cossey, who had planned a Columbine-style attack on Plymouth Whitemarsh High School in Norristown, Pennsylvania, in 2007, was arrested, prosecutors revealed that the teen had idolized the notorious Columbine shooters, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold ([Dale 2008](#)).

Similarly, in 2008, Indiana teenager Russell Frantom was arrested after authorities discovered his plot to carry out a mass shooting at his high school. Police revealed that in his diary, Frantom had described his desire to achieve “instant recognition” by murdering a record number of people ([Hennessy 2015](#)).

These examples are not unique, but they do provide a glimpse into the phenomenon of emulation, a common thread among school shooters who have sought to recreate the misdeeds of others ([Ghose, 2012](#)).

According to a 2016 paper presented at the American Psychological Association’s annual conference, the rise in mass shooting events over recent years suggests a media contagion effect, whereby the media’s coverage of these incidents promotes others to engage in copycat behavior ([Johnson and Joy 2016](#)).

By highlighting the lives and activities of the perpetrators of school violence, media and pop culture outlets contribute to the glorification of their violent deeds.

Promote a Culture of Fatherhood

About a quarter of all American children, roughly 18.4 million, are growing up without a biological, step, or adoptive father in the household ([National Fatherhood Initiative, “Crisis”, 2022](#)). The crisis of fatherlessness and its impact on child development and the proclivity

toward crime and violence must be better understood to accurately comprehend the root causes of school violence.

Studies suggest that children who are raised in a household without a father figure in the home experience greater psychosocial problems than those who have a father in the home ([Brown, et al., 2019](#)).

Data also reveals that fatherless children experience more abuse and bullying ([Brown, et al., 2019](#)), a phenomenon that has been linked to the manifestation of school violence ([Paolini, 2015](#)). In fact, a 2016 study found that out of a sample of 56 school shooters, only 18% grew up in a stable household with both biological parents ([Langman, 2016](#)).

Present fathers who are active in their child's life can significantly affect the child's development ([National Fatherhood Initiative, "Strengths", 2022](#)). Lower rates of substance abuse, juvenile incarceration, teen pregnancy, and emotional or behavioral problems are all associated with children being raised with an active father influence.

Communities should promote a culture of fatherhood to enhance stability within the home and community.

CONCLUSION

Many factors contribute to the manifestation of school violence. Root causes often include diverse elements of a child's development, such as exposure to violence in the household, fatherlessness, lack of connectedness, and bullying at school ([Kowalski, 2022](#)).

Horrifying acts of school violence can also be influenced by inaction on the part of local communities, such as a failure to adhere to school safety best practices or an unwillingness to recognize and intervene in disturbing student behavior.

The above outlined policy recommendations are not meant exhaustive; rather, they serve as a basic starting point for where federal, state, and local policymakers can begin to immediately understand and address the phenomenon of school violence in our society.

The crisis of fatherlessness, innovative approaches to improving mental health, and enhanced safety practices within the school environment are all areas that merit further research and policy development to illuminate the broader conversation on school safety and community violence.

School safety and the learning environment can be improved, but it requires a whole-of-society approach steeped in a commitment to the adoption of best practices and a recognition that societal conditions, such as the prevalence of violence in media and pop culture and the crisis of fatherlessness, are contributing factors that must be acknowledged as well.

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