

Recent tragic mass shootings at schools have revived public interest in school safety research. Billions of public dollars have been invested in school safety technology, and thousands of school police have been added, especially following the 2018 school shooting in Parkland, Florida.<sup>1</sup> Yet, school shootings continue to occur even in “hardened” schools. Sadly, no school community can be truly secured when high powered weaponry is legally available and brought onto campus.

Steps can be taken to reduce the likelihood of a school shooting well before it is attempted. Numerous studies have examined the effectiveness of various school safety measures and their impact on students, especially students of color. These analyses overwhelmingly conclude that resources would be better spent increasing mental wellness supports and providing services that have been proven to improve school climate. The evidence, not assumptions or beliefs, should guide school decision making.

### Research on school shootings indicates that the presence of a school police officer does not deter shooters or reduce casualties

Proponents of school hardening argue that adding school police prevents mass school shootings.<sup>2</sup> School shootings still occur when school police are present, as was the case in Columbine, Santa Fe (TX), Parkland, and Uvalde.<sup>3</sup> Recent studies which have examined school shootings over the past several decades found that the presence of police does not reduce the likelihood or severity.<sup>4</sup> One such study found that the presence of school police did not deter shooters and increased the number of casualties.<sup>5</sup>

*The data suggest no association between having an armed officer and deterrence of violence in these cases. An armed officer on the scene was the number one factor associated with increased casualties after the perpetrators’ use of assault rifles or submachine guns.... Prior research suggests that many school shooters are actively suicidal... so an armed officer may be an incentive rather than a deterrent (Peterson et al. 2022).*

<sup>1</sup> Mark Keierleber, “Inside the \$3 Billion School Security Industry: Companies Market Sophisticated Technology to ‘Harden’ Campuses, but Will It Make Us Safe?,” accessed May 31, 2022.

<sup>2</sup> Aaron Kupchik, “Research on the Impact of School Policing” (ACLU-Pennsylvania, April 2022), <https://www.endzerotolerance.org/impact-of-school-policing>

<sup>3</sup> Hannah Knowles, Jon Swaine, and Joyce Sohyun Lee, “Timeline: How Police Responded to the Texas School Shooter,” *The Washington Post*, May 31, 2022, 6; Kupchik, “Research on the Impact of School Policing.”

<sup>4</sup> Melvin D. Livingston, Matthew E. Rossheim, and Kelli Stidham Hall, “A Descriptive Analysis of School and School Shooter Characteristics and the Severity of School Shootings in the United States, 1999-2018,” *The Journal of Adolescent Health: Official Publication of the Society for Adolescent Medicine* 64, no. 6 (June 2019): 797–99.

<sup>5</sup> Jillian Peterson, James Densley, and Gina Erickson, “Presence of Armed School Officials and Fatal and Nonfatal Gunshot Injuries During Mass School Shootings, United States, 1980-2019,” *JAMA Network Open* 4, no. 2 (February 16, 2021): e2037394.

<sup>6</sup> Eric Madfis, *How to Stop School Rampage Killing: Lessons from Averted Mass Shooting and Bombings* (Palgrave Macmillan Cham, 2020).

### Creating school environments where students feel comfortable talking to a trusted adult—not the presence of police—has been shown to reduce the likelihood of major acts of violence

School shootings and bombings have been prevented when a student shared a concern with a trusted school staff member, not because police were stationed in schools.<sup>6</sup> For example, a student may overhear a discussion about a possible act of extreme violence by a current or former student and report it to a teacher. Researchers call these situations “averted violence.”

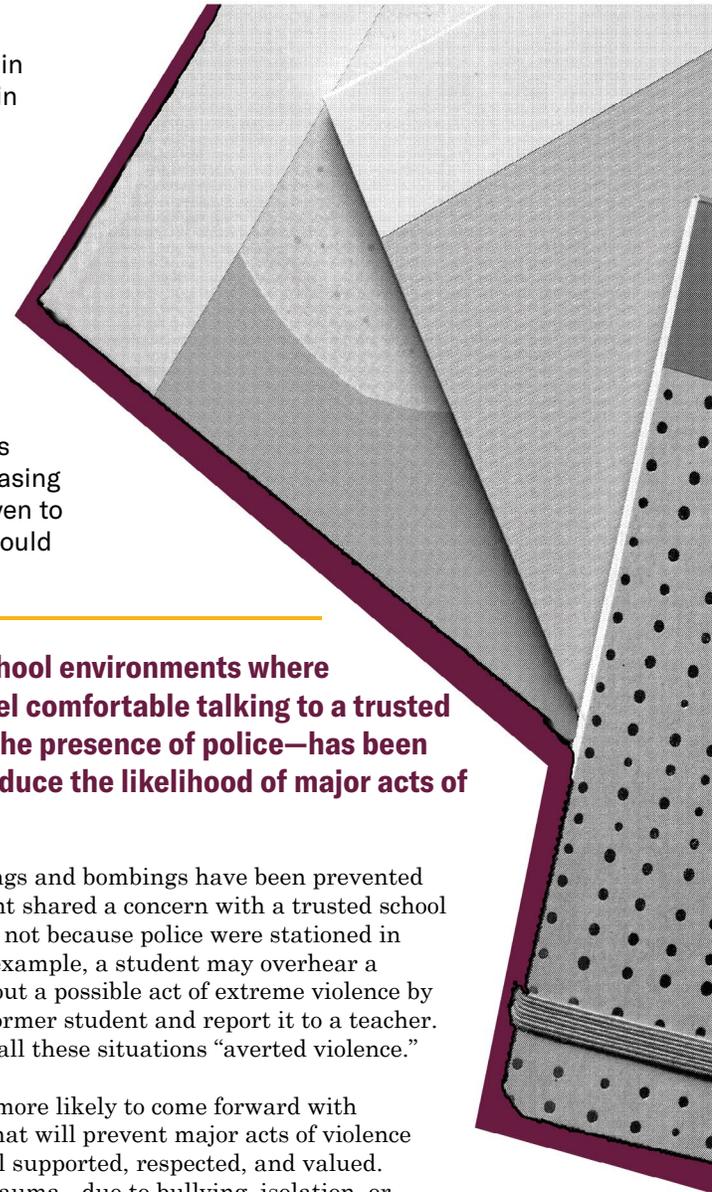
Students are more likely to come forward with information that will prevent major acts of violence when they feel supported, respected, and valued. Evidence of trauma - due to bullying, isolation, or abuse - often begins to appear months or years before an attack.<sup>7</sup> Schools can intervene before a student escalates to a crisis point.<sup>8</sup> When trust is non-existent, broken, or when students view adults as acting unfairly, they are reluctant to report a potential threat. This is especially true for students of color, who are less likely to trust school police than white students.<sup>9</sup> Importantly, interactions between police and youth (and their loved ones), in schools and communities, can result in long-lasting physical and emotional harm.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup> “Key Findings - Comprehensive Mass Shooter Data,” The Violence Project, 2022.

<sup>8</sup> Lina Alathari, “USSS Averting Targeted School Violence: A U.S. Secret Service Analysis of Plots Against Schools” (National Threat Assessment Center: U.S. Department of Homeland Security, United States Secret Service, 2021).

<sup>9</sup> Christen Pentek and Marla E. Eisenberg, “School Resource Officers, Safety, and Discipline: Perceptions and Experiences across Racial/Ethnic Groups in Minnesota Secondary Schools,” *Children and Youth Services Review* 88 (2018): 141–48.

<sup>10</sup> Victor J St John, Andrea M Headley, and Kristen Harper, “Reducing Adverse Police Contact Would Heal Wounds for Children and Communities,” *Child Trends*, 2022.



## School police cause harm to students without effectively securing schools

Student arrest rates are higher in schools with police officers, especially for minor infractions that do not involve serious physical injury, because police are involved in everyday disciplinary issues.<sup>11</sup> According to the U.S. Department of Education, student arrests and law enforcement contact have increased in recent years, resulting in an increased likelihood of being ensnared by the justice system.<sup>12</sup> Placing police in schools increases the likelihood of a youth having a negative or traumatic experience with a police officer during their adolescent years.<sup>13</sup> As a result of inequitable practices and a history of racially discriminatory policing in the U.S., students of color, particularly Black students, report feeling unsafe when police are present in schools when compared to their white peers.<sup>14</sup>

## Threat assessment is often misused, incorrectly targeting students who do not pose a threat to schools

Specific threats made against school communities should be evaluated by school staff and, in extreme circumstances, reported to law enforcement. One popular method, known as threat assessment, is used to determine whether threats made by students are likely to be carried out.<sup>17</sup> In actual practice, however, threat assessment is often used more broadly, in situations in which a young person has not made an explicit threat against the school community or has not indicated an intent or propensity to carry out an act of extreme violence.

There is growing evidence that threat assessment may be used to target, stigmatize, and harm students with

## Installing metal detectors, security cameras, and social media technology may be ineffective, harm school climate, and undermine student trust

For an intervention that has been so widely recommended, at such a high price, studies of the effectiveness of security technology are extremely limited.<sup>15</sup> What evidence there is suggests that metal detectors, alarm systems, and security cameras have been largely ineffective in securing a school community from shootings. Rather, these technologies are often used to catch students who commit minor infractions, such as vandalism.<sup>16</sup> Further, they harm school climate by undermining students' trust of school staff, making students more reluctant to step forward if they or a peer are experiencing mental wellness issues.

disabilities, Black students, and others based on stereotypes.<sup>18</sup> Sometimes it is used to match a student with a "profile" of previous shooters, an approach thoroughly discredited by research on school shootings.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, it is sometimes used in place of providing students with their legally guaranteed services and supports.<sup>20</sup> Typically, students referred to threat assessment wind up with law enforcement records even when they are determined not to be a threat. These records may follow them beyond the years they are in school. Regardless of the intent of threat assessment, further study of the possible misuse and misapplication of threat assessment protocols is urgently needed.

<sup>11</sup> Chongmin Na and Denise C. Gottfredson, "Police Officers in Schools: Effects on School Crime and the Processing of Offending Behaviors," *Justice Quarterly* 30, no. 4 (August 1, 2013): 619–50.

<sup>12</sup> U.S. Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights, "An Overview of Exclusionary Discipline Practices in Public Schools for the 2017-18 School Year" (U.S. Department of Education, June 2021).

<sup>13</sup> Ryan King and Marc Schindler, "Reconsidering Police in Schools," *Contexts* 20, no. 4 (November 1, 2021): 28–33.

<sup>14</sup> Johnathan Nakamoto, Rebeca Cerna, and Alexis Stern, "High School Students' Perceptions of Police Vary By Student Race and Ethnicity: Findings From an Analysis of the California Healthy Kids Survey, 2017/18," *The California Healthy Kids Survey*, 2019, 7.

<sup>15</sup> Heather Schwartz et al., *The Role of Technology in Improving K-12 School Safety* (RAND Corporation, 2016), 12.

<sup>16</sup> James H. Price and Jagdish Khubchandani, "School Firearm Violence

Prevention Practices and Policies: Functional or Folly?," *Violence and Gender* 6, no. 3 (September 2019): 154–67.

<sup>17</sup> Dewey G. Cornell, "Overview: Comprehensive School Threat Assessment Guidelines" (University of Virginia, June 7, 2019).

<sup>18</sup> Ike Swetlitz, "Who's the Threat?," *Searchlight New Mexico*, October 16, 2019; Price and Khubchandani, "School Firearm Violence Prevention Practices and Policies"; Harold Jordan, "The Risks of Threat Assessment to Students Are Dire," *Youth Today*, March 25, 2020.

<sup>19</sup> Bryan Vossekuil et al., "The Final Report and Findings of the Safe School Initiative: Implications for the Prevention of School Attacks in the United States," *United States Secret Service and United States Department of Education*, 2004, 39.

<sup>20</sup> National Disability Rights Network, "K-12 Threat Assessment Processes: Civil Rights Impacts" (National Disability Rights Network, February 2022).

Cultivating school environments that are based on trust and respect is a vital step in effectively preventing violent attacks on school communities. The billions of dollars spent on zero tolerance policies, police presence, enhanced security measures, and increased surveillance can create a school environment where students are less trustful of adult staff, and they do not prevent extreme acts of violence. The money used to fund police officers and other security measures would be better invested in mental wellness professionals and creating supportive school communities. Increased funding for supports means students can receive the support and resources they need to thrive and be successful in their schools.