

How Can We Prevent Gun Violence in American Schools?

Introduction

America's schools are among the safest places for children to be on a daily basis. But for the last 20 years, our students, educators, and parents have lived with rare yet devastating school shootings. This does not have to be. We can foster safe, supportive schools—free from gun violence—by addressing the factors that lead to violent incidents and implementing proven strategies that contribute to a healthy school climate.

This fact sheet lays out research-backed approaches for creating safer schools and ending gun violence that combine school-based interventions with strong gun safety laws. These actions work to intervene before shootings happen.

What do we know about gun violence in schools?

From 2013 through 2022, Everytown identified 720 incidents of gunfire on the grounds of a preschool or K–12 school, including incidents of gun homicides and assaults, gun suicides and attempts, unintentional shootings, and mass shootings.¹

School shooters usually have a connection to the school.

An Everytown analysis of the New York City Police Department's review of active shooter incidents in K–12 schools over five decades found that the shooters were current or former students in 75 percent of these incidents.²

Guns used by shooters under age 18 usually come from the home.

A US Secret Service analysis of nearly 40 years of school violence found that roughly three-quarters of school shooters' guns came from the home of a parent or close relative.³

School shooters nearly always exhibit advance warning signs.

In all incidents of targeted school violence—100 percent—there were warning signs that caused others to be concerned.⁴

School gun violence has a disproportionate impact on students of color.

Two in three incidents of gunfire on school grounds from 2013 to 2021 occurred in schools where one or more racial and/or ethnic minorities constituted a majority of the student population.⁵

How can we prevent school gun violence?

Gun violence prevention policies that will help to end school gun violence include:

Secure Storage And Child-Access Prevention (CAP) Laws

An estimated 4.6 million American children live in households with at least one loaded and unlocked firearm.⁶ Secure storage and CAP laws hold gun owners accountable if a child can or does access firearms that are not securely stored.⁷ Since the vast majority of school shooters under age 18 acquire guns from the home, secure storage is an essential ingredient for preventing gun violence in schools.

Extreme Risk Laws

This policy empowers family members, law enforcement, and, in some states, educators, to petition a civil court to temporarily prevent a person from accessing guns.⁸ Extreme Risk laws allow people in crisis times to get the help they need. As of April 2023, 19 states and the District of Columbia have enacted Extreme Risk laws.⁹ These laws are a vital tool for law enforcement in cases where a person who poses a risk to a school has access to firearms.¹⁰

Raising the Minimum Age to Purchase Semiautomatic Firearms to 21

This policy can help block gun sales to teenagers. Data show that 18- to 20-year-olds commit gun homicides at triple the rate of adults 21 and older.¹¹

Background Checks

Requiring background checks on all gun sales can prevent teenagers and prohibited persons from taking advantage of the background checks loophole, which allows people to buy a firearm online or at a gun show with no background check.¹²

School-based interventions that play a vital role in keeping schools safe include:

Fostering a Safe and Trusting School Climate for All Students

Students thrive in positive school environments. Supportive schools foster an affirming academic climate¹³ while also creating conditions where children have adults with whom they feel safe asking for help or reporting concerning behavior.¹⁴

Implementing Crisis Intervention Programs to Help Schools Identify and Deescalate Dangerous Situations

Schools should work with community partners to create trauma-informed crisis intervention practices to intervene before a person commits an act of violence.¹⁵ A 2018 Department of Homeland Security report stated that “preventing violence by detecting and addressing these [behavioral] red flags is more effective than any physical security measure.”¹⁶ Successful crisis interventions uphold students’ civil rights and avoid a disproportionate impact on historically marginalized students and students with disabilities, address student access to guns, and provide appropriate school-based mental health services.¹⁷

Ensuring Sufficient Mental Health Counselors to Create a Safe School Climate

As part of any effective strategy, schools need to ensure that students have adequate access to mental health services, and legislatures need to fund adequate mental health professionals in schools. The National Association of School Psychologists found the average student-to-psychologist ratio to be 1,233 students to one school psychologist—more than double their recommended 500 students.¹⁸

Informing Parents About Secure Gun Storage

School districts can help prevent shootings by notifying families about the critical importance of secure firearms storage.¹⁹ Public awareness campaigns like the Be SMART²⁰ program, developed by Everytown, educate the school community on secure gun storage.²¹ School districts across the country are passing resolutions requiring schools to provide parents with resources about secure gun storage.²² State legislatures can also enact laws mandating this requirement.²³

Implementing School Security Enhancements

School safety experts²⁴ recommend that schools implement both access control measures, such as single-access points, fencing, or external door locks, and interior door locks to enable educators to lock out shooters as proven intervention points.

Which school safety measures have been harmful to students?

Arming teachers is not an effective strategy for preventing gun violence in schools.

Everytown shares the earnest desire to respond. But arming teachers puts the whole school at greater risk.²⁵ Studies show that even highly trained law enforcement see their ability to shoot accurately in “split-second” situations decrease significantly.²⁶ In addition, to expect teachers to neutralize an active shooter, possibly even a former student, is dangerous and unrealistic. Finally, armed teachers complicate the response of law enforcement in already complex, fast-moving situations.

Overpolicing of schools has had detrimental impacts on students.

Not only have School Resource Officers (SROs) not been shown to reduce deaths or injuries from school shootings or gun-related incidents in schools, but research demonstrates that their presence contributes to more suspensions, expulsions, and arrests, as well as increased absenteeism and decreased graduation rates.²⁷ In addition, the presence of SROs leads to particularly severe and disproportionate consequences for Black, Indigenous, and Latinx students, as well as students with disabilities.²⁸

If schools do choose to have SROs, it is essential to put in place several guardrails: officers should not act in disciplinary roles, they must be answerable to school leaders, and training in minimum-use-of-force techniques should be required.

Active shooter drills increase anxiety in the whole school community.

Training school staff on how to respond to active shooter situations is important. But there is no strong conclusive evidence that supports the value of drills involving students, neither for preventing shootings nor for protecting the school community. In fact, there is mounting evidence that student-involved drills are associated with lasting harms, such as increases in depression, stress, and anxiety, as well as widespread fear of death throughout the school community.²⁹

Conclusion

Policymakers can help prevent gun violence in schools by implementing proactive, evidence-based interventions. Targeted gun violence prevention policies can prevent guns from falling into the wrong hands and being used in a school-based shooting. School-based strategies can work to intervene when a student shows signs of crisis. Planning and security strategies, as a last line of defense, can ensure that a school is prepared to quickly respond appropriately to any threat. Our leaders must take responsible action to keep our schools safe. They can do so with data-driven strategies that have been proven to reduce violence in schools.

For Everytown’s full “Plan to Keep Students Safe,” go to everytownresearch.org/school-safety.

For footnotes for this fact sheet, go to everytownresearch.org/footnotes-how-can-we-prevent-gun-violence-in-american-schools.