Creating Safe Schools:
Examining Student Perceptions of Their Physical Safety at School

MICHELLE CROFT, RAEAL MOORE, AND GRETCHEN GUFFY

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Michelle Croft, PhD/JD

Michelle Croft is a principal research associate in Policy, Advocacy, and Government Relations.

Raeal Moore, PhD

Raeal Moore is a senior research scientist in ACT Research specializing in survey methodological research and research on education best practices in P-12 schools.

Gretchen Guffy, MPP

Gretchen Guffy is a senior director in Policy, Advocacy, and Government Relations.

SUMMARY

Safety is essential to student well-being and success. Because of this, a large percentage of parents and children are concerned about school safety.

To get a better understanding of school safety from a student's perspective, ACT-tested students were surveyed and asked about their school's climate and the types of safety measures their school currently has.

SO WHAT?

Given the nationwide focus on and concern about school safety, along with the correlation between school safety and student performance, ACT surveyed a sample of 10th- through 12th-grade students participating in the October 2018 national administration of the ACT® test. Approximately 16,000 students completed the optional survey that was sent to them following the completion of the ACT.

NOW WHAT?

The students in our survey rated their schools as generally safe but had diverse opinions and suggestions about how to improve school safety. Overall, student responses highlighted a need for more mental health services. Moreover, the responses indicated that students' feedback should be taken into account when developing school safety policies. Based on this information, further research on safety initiatives and measures should be conducted to understand their effectiveness.

ACT® Center for Equity in Learning

Creating Safe Schools: Examining Student Perceptions of Their Physical Safety at School

Michelle Croft, Raeal Moore, and Gretchen Guffy

Background

Safety is essential to student well-being and success. Students who feel unsafe at school—both physically and psychologically—cannot learn to their fullest potential.[1] According to a 2018 report by Gallup, a large percentage of parents and children are concerned about school safety.[2] Thirty-five percent of parents fear for their child's safety at school, up from 27% in 2017, and 20% of parents say their children have expressed fears about their safety at school. And according to a recent Pew Research Center study, 57% of US teens worry that a school shooting could happen at their school.[3]

School violence is a persistent problem in schools throughout the United States, prompting the recent establishment of a Federal Commission on School Safety to review safety practices and make recommendations on how best to keep students safe.[4]

States are also proposing and/or enacting school safety legislation. According to the National Council of State Legislators, as of February 20, 2019, 686 bills or resolutions dealing with school safety have been introduced in 50 states and Washington, DC on issues including, but not limited to, expanded or restricted firearm use, mental health services, arming school personnel, building security, and emergency drills. The most popular types of legislation introduced involved the role of law enforcement support in schools (n=264); the presence of firearms in schools (n=248); and funding for school safety activities (n=189). Of the bills introduced, 105 have been enacted, and eight resolutions have been adopted. A large number of those enacted involve the role of law enforcement in assisting with school safety measures (n=35); the appropriation of funding for school safety activities (n=38); and building security (n=30). At least 13 bills and two resolutions deal with the role of firearms in schools. Twenty-two of the bills enacted address mental health needs of students, such as improving access to mental health professionals, relevant training for school personnel, and the development of mental health curricula.[5]
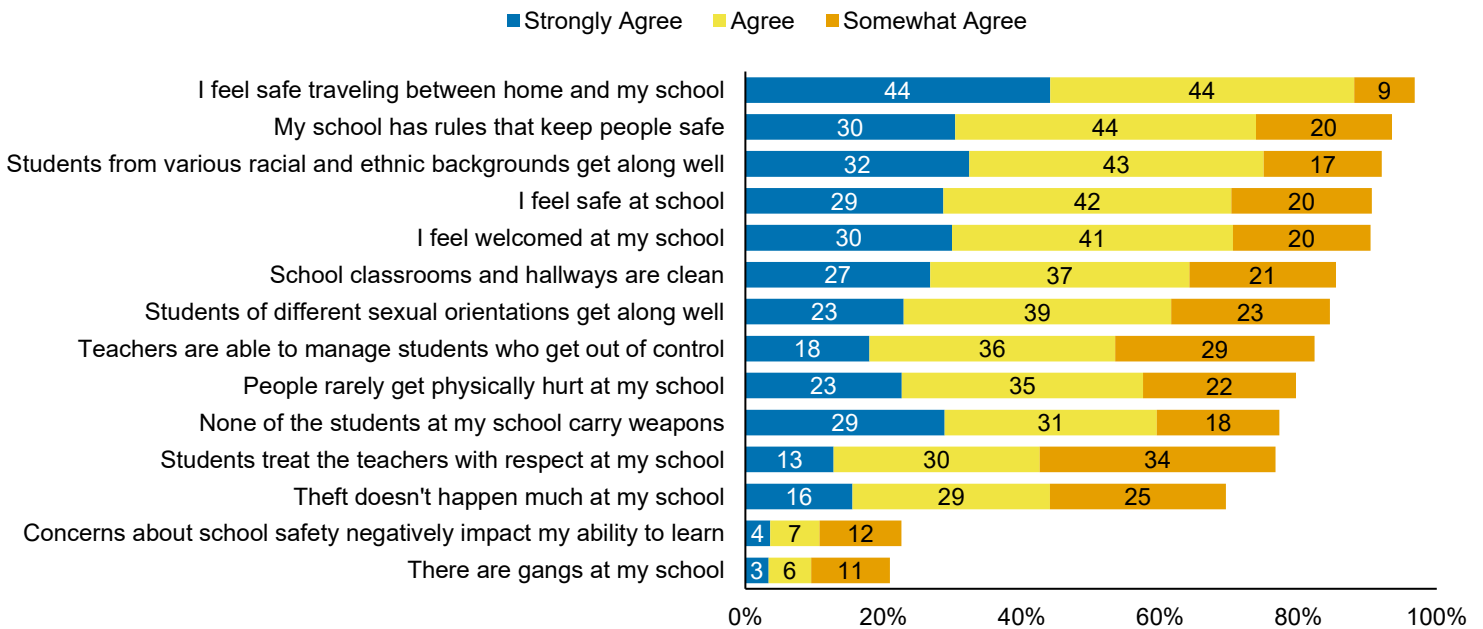
Given the nationwide focus on and concern about school safety, along with the correlation between school safety and student performance, ACT surveyed a sample of 10th- through 12th-grade students participating in the October 2018 national administration of the ACT® test. Students were asked questions about their school's climate and the types of safety measures their school currently has.[6] Approximately 16,000 students completed the optional survey that was sent to them following the completion of the ACT.[7]

Findings

School Climate

Students generally agree that their school is safe (Figure 1). However, while students reported feeling safe traveling between home and school (97%) and feel safe (91%) and welcomed (90%) at school, students also reported that concerns about school safety negatively affect their ability to learn (23%).

Figure 1. School Climate Questions, Percent Agreement

■ Strongly Agree   ■ Agree   ■ Somewhat Agree

Question	Strongly Agree	Agree	Somewhat Agree
I feel safe traveling between home and my school	44	44	9
My school has rules that keep people safe	30	44	20
Students from various racial and ethnic backgrounds get along well	32	43	17
I feel safe at school	29	42	20
I feel welcomed at my school	30	41	20
School classrooms and hallways are clean	27	37	21
Students of different sexual orientations get along well	23	39	23
Teachers are able to manage students who get out of control	18	36	29
People rarely get physically hurt at my school	23	35	22
None of the students at my school carry weapons	29	31	18
Students treat the teachers with respect at my school	13	30	34
Theft doesn't happen much at my school	16	29	25
Concerns about school safety negatively impact my ability to learn	4	7	12
There are gangs at my school	3	6	11

Note: The percentages in the text may differ from the figure due to rounding.

Further, when we created an average climate score for each student, we found differences among student groups (Figure 2).[8] The climate scale ranged from 1 to 6 where 1 is "strongly disagree" (i.e., least safe) and 6 is "strongly agree" (i.e., safest). Female students reported feeling less safe than did male students (M_M = 4.58, M_F = 4.73), while Black and Hispanic students reported feeling less safe than White students (M_{Black} = 4.45, M_{Hisp} = 4.59, M_{Wh} = 4.69). Safety also varied depending on the size of the school: students attending the smallest schools in the survey felt safer than students attending the largest schools (M_{Small} = 4.82, M_{Large} = 4.50).[9]

**Figure 2.** School Climate Score by Student Demographics
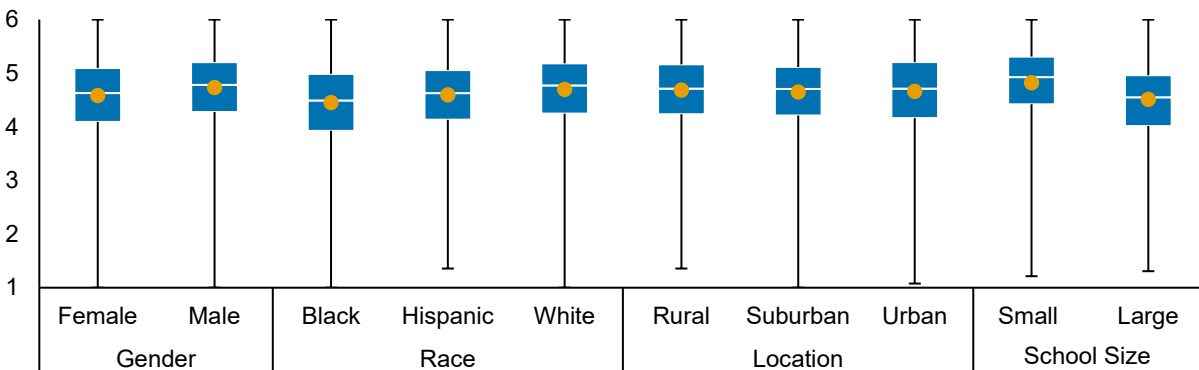
Note: The figure presents climate score data by student demographics, using box and whisker plots. Data are visualized in five ways: box (dispersion of climate scores between the first and third quartiles), horizontal line inside box (median score), orange dot (mean score), whisker (dispersions of scores above the third quartile and below the first quartile), and hash marks at the top and bottom of each plot (the maximum and minimum climate scores).[10]

Students attending schools located in "town" areas are not presented in the figures as their responses were similar to students attending rural schools. The Appendix includes tables for all school locations and school sizes.

Current Safety Measures

To gain a better understanding of the safety measures currently used in schools, we asked students whether their school has several specific types of measures. Nearly all students reported some safety measures by their school; only two percent said that their schools did not have any of the measures listed (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Current Safety Measures Used in Schools
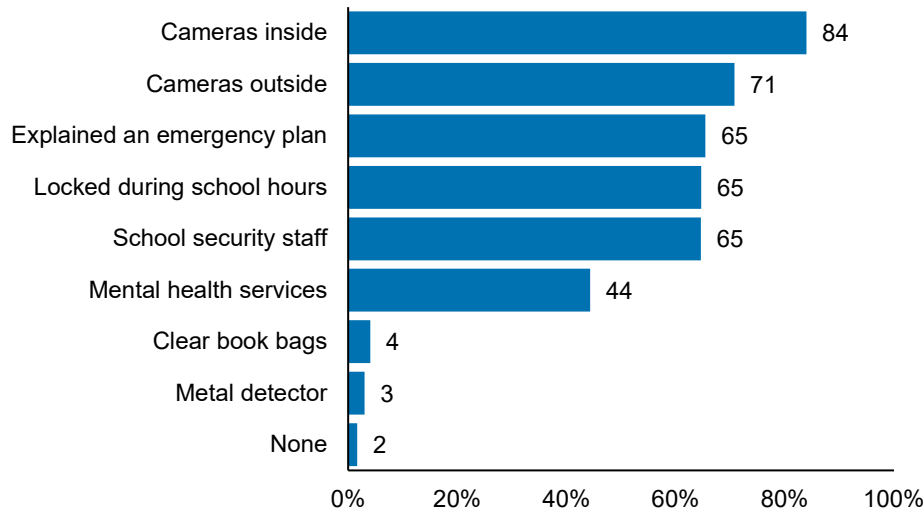
Cameras were identified most frequently: 84% of respondents reported cameras inside their school, and 71% reported cameras outside it (Figure 3). Approximately two-thirds of students reported that their school is locked during school hours, has security staff, or has explained an emergency plan. Forty-four percent of students reported that their school provides mental health services for students who need them.

Safety measures varied by school type and location (Figure 4). For example, students in rural schools were more likely than students in urban schools to report that their school was locked during school hours (69% vs. 60%), and students in small schools were more likely to report this than students in large schools (67% vs. 56%).

**Figure 4.** Percentage Reporting that Their School was Locked During School Hours
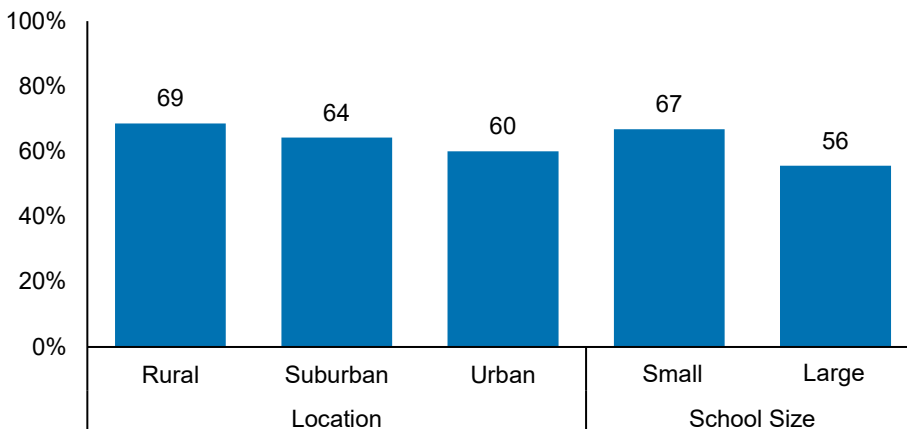
There were also school type and location differences in the percentages of students reporting that their school employed security staff (Figure 5). Students in suburban (77%) and urban schools (74%) were more likely than students in rural schools (51%) to report that their school had security staff. Likewise, students in large schools were much more likely to report this than students in small schools (88% vs. 36%).

Figure 5. Percentage Reporting that Their School Employs Security Staff
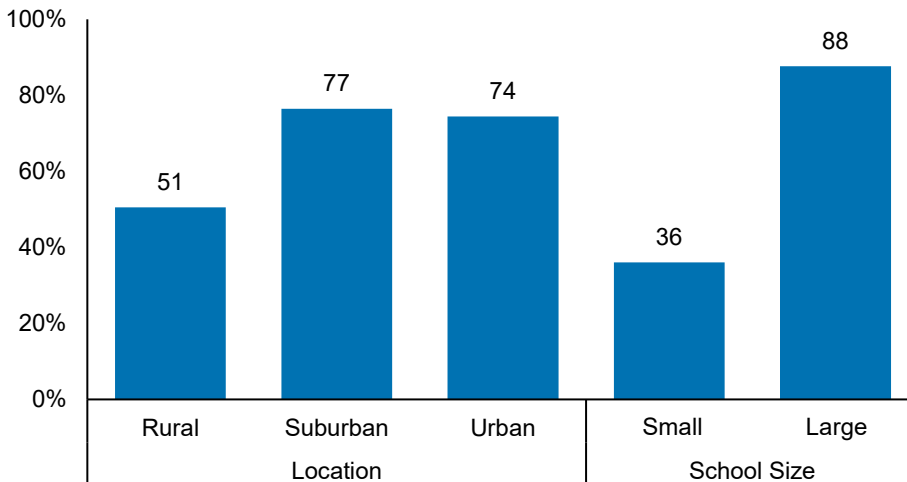
Finally, there were school type and location differences in access to mental health services (Figure 6). Students in suburban schools were more likely than students in both urban and rural schools to report that mental health services were available for students who needed them (50% vs. 45% and 41%). Students attending large schools were also much more likely to report this than students in small schools (54% vs. 38%).

Figure 6. Percentage Reporting that Their School Provides Mental Health Services for Students Who Need Them
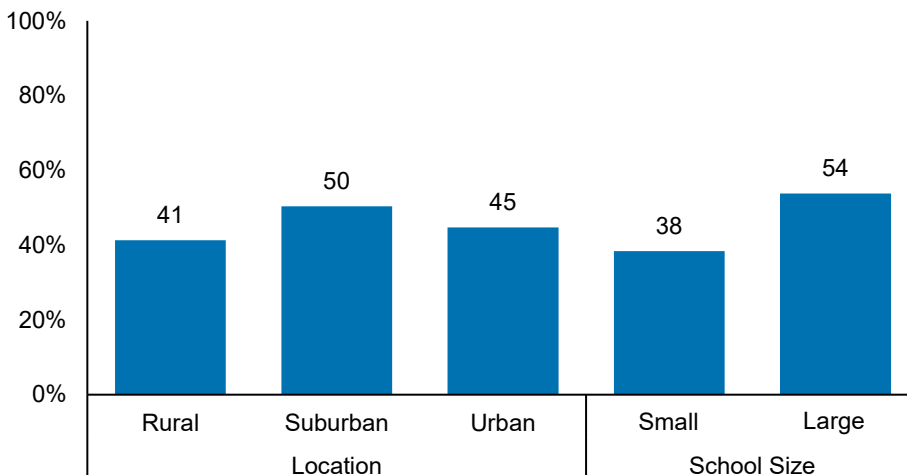

School characteristic trends overlap with analyses of student characteristics, as certain student groups in our study were more likely to attend schools in a particular location or of a particular size (e.g., White students were more likely to attend rural schools).[11] When examining by student race/ethnicity, White students were more likely to attend schools that lock their doors during school hours (71%) and provide

students with mental health services (47%) than either Black (52% locked doors; 35% mental health) or Hispanic students (56% locked doors; 40% mental health). Minority students were more likely than their White counterparts to attend schools with school security staff (Figure 7).

The safety measures and mental health service access also varied by students' reported family income. As family income increased, so did the proportion of students who reported attending schools with locked doors and greater access to mental health services. The percentage of students attending a school with security staff on site was relatively the same across income brackets.

Figure 7. Percentage Reporting that Their School has Locked Doors, Security Staff, and Mental Health Services, by Race/Ethnicity and Family Income
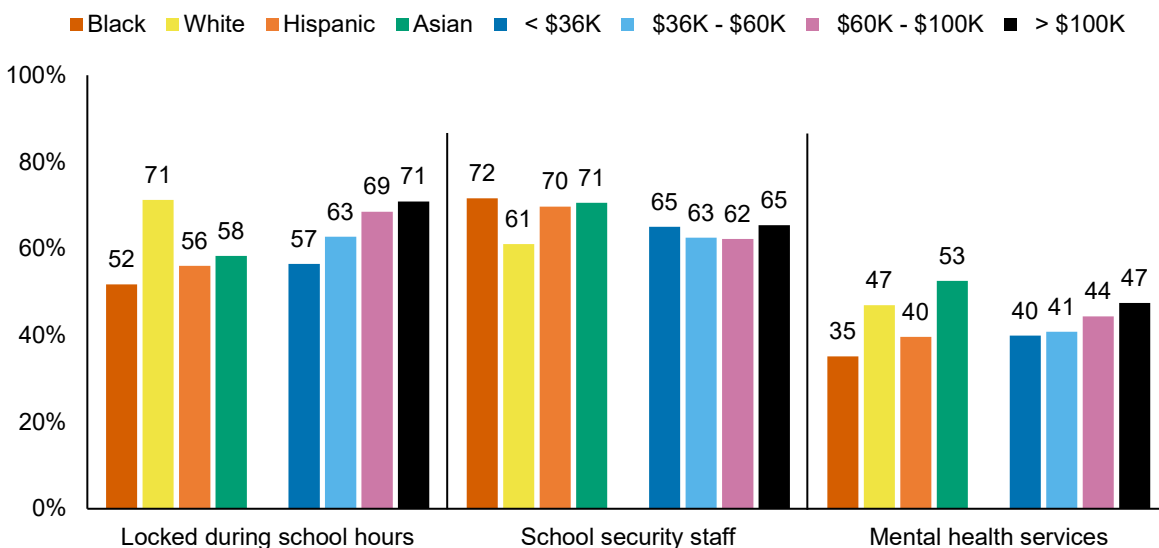
With respect to mental health services access across school location, school size, students' race/ethnicity, and household family income, roughly 45% to 65% of respondents reported that their school does not provide such services or presumably, if they do offer such services, students are unaware of them.

Preferred Additional Safety Measures

In addition to inquiring about students' current perceptions of school safety, we also asked students about what measures would make them feel safer in school. If a student already noted that their school had locked doors, metal detectors, or clear book bags, those items were not asked.

Of all the questions that students were asked, providing (or increasing) mental health services for students who need them was most commonly noted as something that would increase feelings of safety and was selected by more than one-third (38%) of students. Other frequent responses were to hire (or add additional) security staff (36%) and for the school to develop or clarify an emergency plan (30%). Of the questions that were asked only of students whose schools did not already have the measure, locked doors (26% of these respondents) and metal detectors (20%) were the most common responses.

Students were asked to specify in their own words any additional support that the school should put resources toward to make students feel safer in school. More than 800 students provided unique responses. Most of the measures suggested by students were preventative. Many students indicated the

importance of providing mental health services, including the need to hire new staff or train existing staff on how to identify and address student mental health challenges. Hiring more security staff was also a frequent suggestion. Other preventative measures included having stronger doors and requiring the use of identification badges to enter the school. A smaller but meaningful number of students suggested that every classroom be equipped with easy access to a fire extinguisher that could be used as a weapon against an intruder.

In 2018, the US Department of Education was considering allowing schools to use federal funding to buy guns for school staff and to train them on how to use the guns in a school setting.[12] Given that this proposal had raised controversy in schools and the media, we wanted to gauge student opinion on it. We therefore asked students what they thought of having certain teachers and staff members receive special training to carry guns in school buildings. Overall, 46% opposed this idea, 34% favored it, and 19% were neutral.[13]

Figure 8. Views on Allowing Teachers and Staff Members to Receive Special Training to Carry Guns in School Buildings.
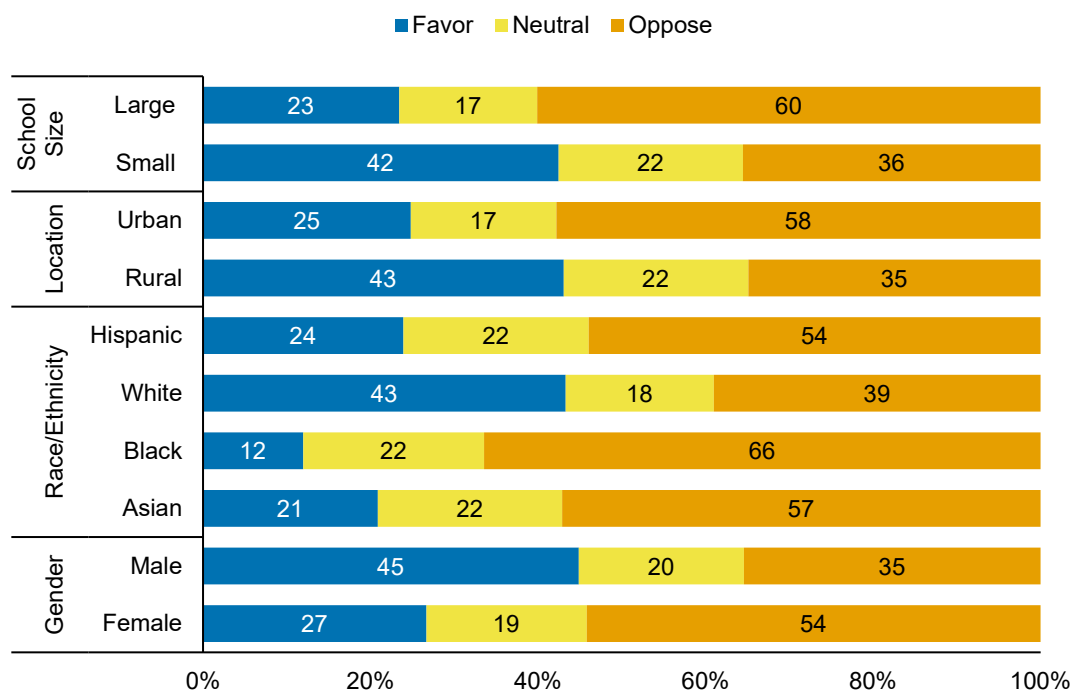

Note: Here and in Figure 9, responses of suburban students do not appear because they were similar to the responses of urban students. Full tables can be found in the Appendix.

Students in large schools were more likely than students in small schools to oppose the idea of teachers and staff members receiving special training to carry guns in school buildings (60% vs. 36%), as were students in urban schools compared to students in rural schools (58% vs. 35%). Further, minority students were more likely to oppose this idea than were White students, and female students were more likely to oppose this than were male students (54% vs. 35%; Figure 8).

Students generally thought that arming trained teachers/staff members with guns would not necessarily make schools safer (Figure 9). Overall, 32% reported that their school would be safer if such a policy were enacted, 30% reported that schools would be about as safe as they currently are, and 38% reported that their school would be less safe. When examined by school type (location and size) and student demographics (race and gender), students' perceptions of whether arming trained teachers/staff members with guns would make schools safer mimicked patterns found for their perceptions of whether teachers/staff members should be allowed to receive special training to carry guns in school buildings.

Figure 9. Views of the Impact on School Safety of Allowing Trained Teachers/Staff Members to be Armed with Guns in a School Setting.
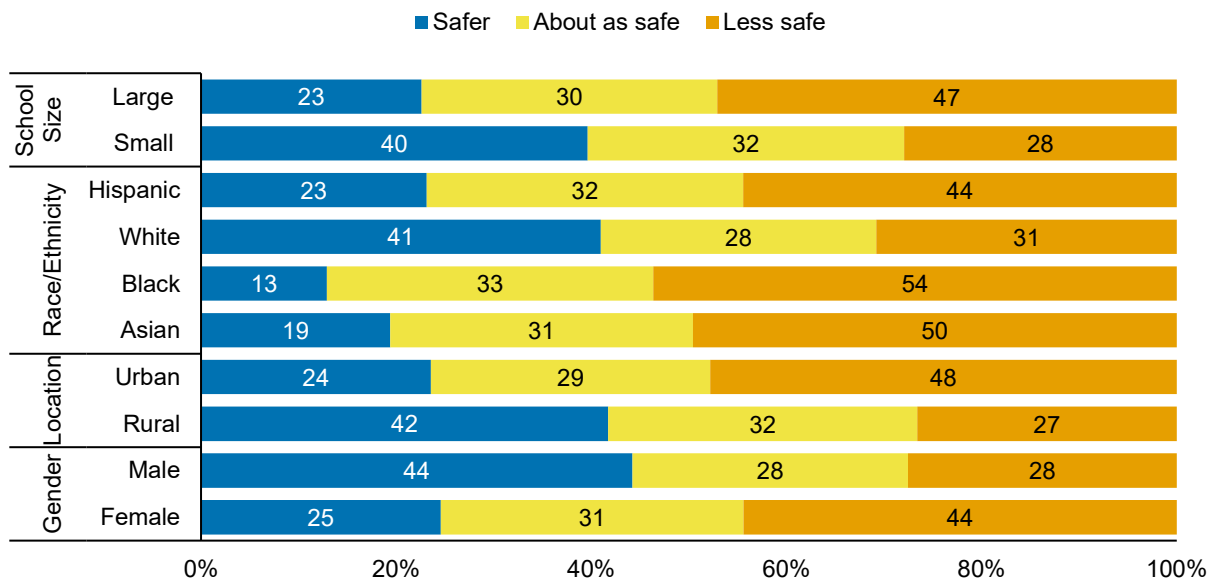
Recommendations

The students in our survey rated their schools as generally safe but had diverse opinions and suggestions about how to improve school safety. In particular, their responses suggest the following recommendations:

1. **Federal and state funding should be provided to expand, and promote the availability of, school mental health services.**

The high percentages of students who reported that their school does not provide mental health services suggest that these schools may not have adequate mental health services, or that the services exist but students may be unaware of them. Schools need funding not just to ensure that all students have access to mental health services but also to publicize the availability of the services. Even if some of these findings happened to be inaccurate, it would still mean that a number of respondents were unaware that such services were in fact available, suggesting that some schools may need to be proactive about communicating with their students on this important topic.

2. **Additional research is needed to examine the effectiveness and unintended consequences of safety measures.**

Students in our survey indicated that their schools are implementing a variety of safety measures, and student responses suggest that more measures may be needed. There is a need to study the effectiveness of potential school safety measures to ensure that they are indeed effective and to evaluate if there are any unintended consequences of implementation.

3. **Policymakers must ensure that their students' perspectives are taken into account when considering which school safety measures to implement.**

Students' views differed by geography, school size, race/ethnicity, and gender, suggesting that choice and implementation of school safety measures cannot be a one-size-fits-all process. Along with studying the effectiveness of potential school safety measures, policymakers must also gather and use student input on the possible negative consequences of particular measures in supporting a safe learning environment for all students. The Every Student Succeeds Act requires stakeholder feedback—including student feedback—on a variety of decisions from assessments to accountability. We recommend a similar stakeholder feedback requirement for states and districts planning to use federal funding to implement safety measures.
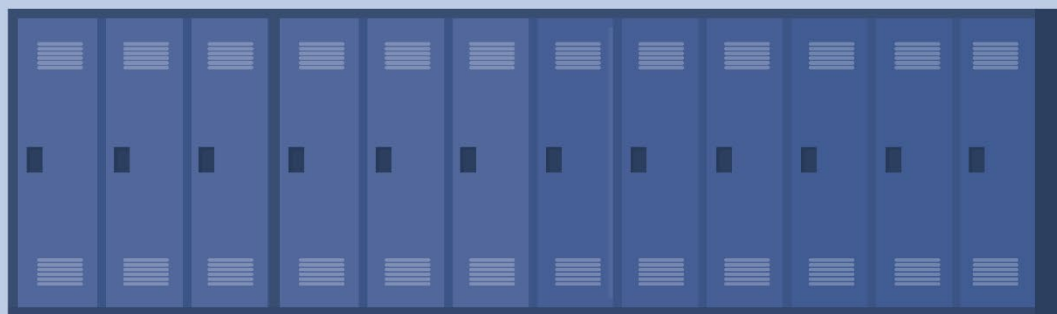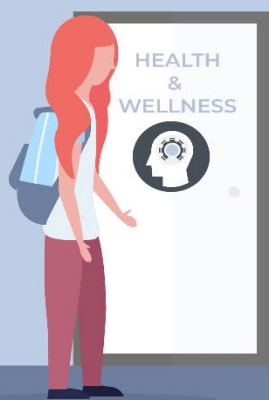
Notes

1. National Association of School Psychologists, *Rethinking School Safety: Communities and Schools Working Together* (NASP, 2013), https://www.nasponline.org/Documents/Research%20and%20Policy/Advocacy%20Resources/Rethin king_School_Safety_Key_Message.pdf.

2. Jeffrey M. Jones, "More Parents, Children Fearful for Safety at School," *Gallup*, August 24, 2018 https://news.gallup.com/poll/241625/parents-children-fearful-safety-school.aspx.

3. Nikki Graf, *"A Majority of U.S. Teens Fear a Shooting Could Happen at their School, and Most Parents Share Their Concern,"* Pew Research Center, April 19, 2019, http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/04/18/a-majority-of-u-s-teens-fear-a-shooting-could-happen-at-their-school-and-most-parents-share-their-concern/.

4. US Department of Education, *Final Report of the Federal Commission on School Safety* (Washington, DC: Federal Commission on School Safety, 2018), https://www2.ed.gov/documents/school-safety/school-safety-report.pdf.

5. Michelle Exstrom, *"School Safety: Overview and Legislative Tracking,"* National Conference of State Legislatures' Executive Committee, May 8, 2019, http://www.ncsl.org/research/education/school-safety.aspx.

6. As part of ACT registration, students provide information about their gender, race/ethnicity, and their high school. We used data from the National Center for Education Statistics to classify the location of the student's high school (e.g., rural, town, suburban, and urban) as well as to create school size categories. School size was categorized by enrollment. Schools with 1–500 students are classified as "small schools." Schools with 2,500 or more students are classified as "large schools." Data for schools with enrollments of 500–999 and 1,000–2,499 can be found in the Appendix.

7. The response rate for the survey was approximately 17%.

8. To create a climate score for each student, we averaged that student's responses to all of the items in Figure 1. Negatively worded items were reverse coded, and only data from students who responded to 80% or more of the items were included.

9. Generalized linear modeling was used to identify differences between groups. Statistically significant differences between groups at alpha = .05 are presented in this paper.

10. For example, for female students, the minimum and maximum values were 1 ("strongly disagree") and 6 ("strongly agree"), respectively. Female students, on average, had a 4.5 school climate measure. Approximately 25% of them had a 4 or lower and 25% had a 5 or higher.

11. We recognize that it would be most ideal to break out these comparisons, but limited sample sizes prohibited this type of analysis.

12. Adam Harris, "A Loophole that Could Let States Buy Teachers Guns with Federal Funds," *The Atlantic*, August 23, 2018, https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2018/08/the-audacity-of-arming-teachers-with-federal-dollars/568387/; Erica L. Green, "Betsy DeVos Eyes Federal Education Grants to Put Guns in Schools," *The New York Times*, August 23, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/23/us/politics/devos-guns-in-schools.html

13. Students were asked to respond using a 5-point scale ranging from "strongly favor" to "strongly oppose," with the ability to select a "neutral" response. Responses were recoded so that students who selected "strongly favor" and "somewhat favor" were coded as favoring training of teachers/staff members to carry guns. Responses for students who selected "somewhat oppose" and "strongly oppose" were coded as opposing this.

Appendix

Table A1. Safety Measures by School Location and Size

	Location (%)				Size (%)			
	Rural	**Town**	**Suburban**	**Urban**	**1-499**	**500-999**	**1,000-2,499**	**2,500 +**
Metal detector	2	2	2	6	2	4	3	2
Locked during school hours	69	68	64	60	67	69	63	56
Cameras inside	87	86	84	80	83	87	84	82
Cameras outside	74	74	68	69	72	74	70	65
School security staff	51	56	77	74	36	60	81	88
Clear book bags	4	5	4	4	4	5	4	4
Explained an emergency plan	65	65	67	65	66	66	66	63
Mental health services	41	41	50	45	38	43	48	54
None	2	1	1	2	2	1	1	1

Table A2. Views on Allowing Teachers and Staff Members to Receive Special Training to Carry Guns in School Buildings

	Location (%)				Size (%)			
	Rural	**Town**	**Suburban**	**Urban**	**1-499**	**500-999**	**1,000-2,499**	**2,500+**
Favor	43	41	28	25	42	36	29	23
Neutral	22	21	17	17	22	20	18	17
Oppose	35	38	55	58	36	44	53	60

Table A3. Views of the Impact on School Safety of Allowing Trained Teachers/Staff Members to be Armed with Guns in a School Setting

	Location (%)				Size (%)			
	Rural	**Town**	**Suburban**	**Urban**	**1-499**	**500-999**	**1,000-2,499**	**2,500+**
Safer	42	39	27	24	40	35	28	23
About as Safe	32	31	29	29	32	31	28	30
Less Safe	27	30	45	48	28	34	44	47

ACT® Center for
Equity in Learning

About ACT's Center for Equity in Learning

ACT's Center for Equity in Learning focuses on closing gaps in equity, opportunity and achievement for underserved populations and working learners. Through purposeful investments, employee engagement, and thoughtful advocacy efforts, the Center supports innovative partnerships, actionable research, initiatives, campaigns, and programs to further ACT's mission of helping people achieve education and workplace success.

For more information, visit equityinlearning.act.org
@ACTEquity
@ACT

About ACT Research

ACT Research leads the field with authority and high-quality scientific evidence in support of education and workforce practices, solutions, and services. Our mission-driven team comprises a variety of backgrounds and disciplines, and offers a wide spectrum of knowledge and skills, enabling us to deliver quality, high-impact products and services aligned to ACT's strategy and mission. Together, our research teams provide policymakers, educators, parents, and learners with research-based insights to inform their decision-making, and deliver educators and workforce development professionals with tools and services needed for education and career navigation.

About Policy, Advocacy, and Government Relations

Policy, Advocacy, and Government Relations is dedicated to positioning ACT as a thought leader at the national and state levels to inform and influence education and workforce policymaking and is made up of interrelated units staffed by experts in policy development, federal and state government relations, and outreach to states and national organizations. Together, Policy, Advocacy, and Government Relations, provides insights and resources to states, workforce and education entities, and other organizations to help individuals navigate their education and career pathways.