

# TIP LINES FOR SCHOOL SAFETY

A National Portrait of Tip Line Use



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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**School tip lines, which are structured systems that allow students, parents, school staff, or community members to report information about potential threats, are a promising approach to school safety.**

Tip lines, which focus on preventing incidents that are threats to school safety or student well-being, come in various forms, including computer applications, Web sites, and telephone hotlines. Studies have shown that, in many school shooting incidents and other attacks, there were warning signs known to other individuals before the act was carried out. Leveraging such knowledge about potential threats, tip line systems relay information to the most appropriate parties, such as school officials, law enforcement officers, and mental health professionals, so action can be taken before an incident occurs.

Although tip lines are promising, very little is known about how widely they have been implemented and what their characteristics are. This report is based on survey responses from a nationally representative sample of 1,226 school principals conducted from February through July 2019. The survey, conducted by RTI International, an independent, nonprofit research institution, was designed to document the prevalence of tip lines, types of schools that are more likely to use tip lines, ways in which tip lines are designed and implemented, challenges of operating tip lines, and perceived effectiveness of tip lines.

## » Key Findings

- Just over half (51%) of public middle and high schools in the United States currently have a tip line in operation.
  - Most tip lines are relatively new. Sixty percent have been in operation for less than 3 years.
- Principals perceive tip lines as an effective school safety strategy, addressing multiple threats:
  - Seventy-seven percent believed that their tip lines made them more aware of safety issues at their school.
  - Over 50% said that their schools' tip lines had prevented violent incidents.
  - Two-thirds believed that their tip lines allowed their schools to respond more effectively to bullying.
  - Seventy-three percent reported that their tip lines had prevented incidents of self-harm or suicide.
- Over half of tip lines are staffed or monitored 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, such that a staff member receives calls, texts, or other entries in real time.
- Most are described as anonymous rather than confidential.
- Most schools involve school administrators (89%) and law enforcement officers (56%) in their tip line programs, but only about 25% involve mental health professionals or students as active partners.
- The most common challenges to operating a tip line include the following:
  - Receiving tips with insufficient information to act on
  - Raising student awareness and getting students to submit tips
  - Identifying false or bogus submissions
  - Receiving tips for situations that are considered out of scope
  - Raising community awareness

## Introduction

School tip lines are structured systems (including computer applications, Web sites, telephone hotlines, etc.) that allow students, parents, school staff, or community members to report information about potential threats to students or others. Tip lines offer a promising approach to enhance school safety by relying on student knowledge of potential threats, providing a safe reporting environment, and establishing a response protocol to act on the tips and prevent incidents. They leverage knowledge, primarily from students, about potential threats to school safety and other problems schools face daily (e.g., bullying, substance use, self-harm).<sup>1</sup> Students are on the front lines and are aware of many behaviors and threats, both in person and over social media, that occur out of the sight of teachers, administrators, and other school staff. Many students do not want to be responsible for getting others in trouble or do not know how to report. Tip lines provide a confidential or anonymous way to share this information with school administrators, law enforcement officers, service providers, and other partners. Tip lines work by identifying harms and threats before they happen rather than waiting to respond to an event. These features have brought increasing attention to tip lines as a potentially effective school safety strategy, with many states passing legislation requiring their use and federal agencies offering funding support (see sidebar).

However, very little is known about how widely tip lines have been implemented and what their characteristics are. This report summarizes the results of the first national effort to document the use of tip lines in public middle and high schools in the United States. The findings described in this report are based on a Web-based survey completed by 1,226 school principals or school safety points of contact at a nationally representative sample of public middle and high schools in the United States. The survey, conducted by RTI

International, an independent, nonprofit research institution, was designed to document the prevalence of tip lines, types of schools that are more likely to use tip lines, ways in which tip lines are designed and implemented, challenges of operating tip lines, and perceived effectiveness of tip lines.

### » Tip Line Laws and Federal Support

The context of tip lines is rapidly evolving. A review of the state legislation requiring the use of tip lines conducted by RTI in fall 2019 revealed that at that time 20 states had passed such legislation and another 3 states had pending legislation.

Federal agencies are providing funding to support the development and maintenance of anonymous school tip lines. For example, the Department of Justice's 2019 STOP School Violence Technology and Threat Assessment Solutions for Safer Schools Program, funded by the Bureau of Justice Assistance, awarded projects under Category 7 to "implement a technological solution, such as an anonymous reporting technology, that can be implemented as a mobile phone-based app, a hotline, or a Web site in the applicant's geographic area designed to enable students, teachers, faculty, and community members to anonymously identify threats of school violence" (<https://bja.ojp.gov/sites/g/files/xyckuh186/files/media/document/BJA-2019-15118.PDF>).

<sup>1</sup> A review of school attacks occurring from 2008 through 2017 concluded that all attackers exhibited concerning behaviors (engaged in behavior that caused fear, issued direct threats of violence, or brought weapons to school). Most attackers elicited concern from others, and most communicated their intent to attack. National Threat Assessment Center. (2019). *Protecting America's schools: A U.S. Secret Service analysis of targeted school violence*. Washington, DC: Department of Homeland Security, U.S. Secret Service.

## » Study Methods

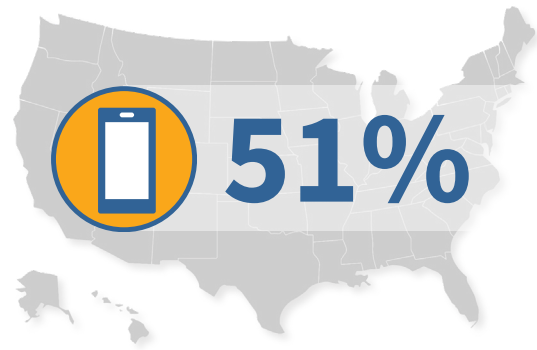
RTI conducted the national survey of school tip line implementation as part of a grant from the National Institute of Justice (Award No. 2017-CX-BK-0004). The Department of Education’s Common Core of Data (CCD), a comprehensive, national database of all public elementary and secondary schools and school districts, was used to identify the study sample. Survey respondents were based on a random sample of 4,120 public middle and high schools that was stratified by school size, region, and urbanicity. Approval for the study was obtained from the school districts and the institutional review board at RTI. Principals at the sampled schools received a letter from RTI inviting them to participate in a brief (10-minute), Web-based survey on tip lines. Principals could complete the survey themselves or delegate it

to the person most knowledgeable about each school’s safety practices. The survey was fielded from February through July of 2019, with extensive follow-up procedures undertaken by RTI (e.g., e-mail and telephone follow-up; a short, hard-copy version mailed to selected schools) to increase participation. Surveys were completed by 1,226 schools (a 30% response rate). A nonresponse bias analysis was conducted using CCD data to compare characteristics (e.g., size, region) of the 1,226 schools that completed the survey to those of the original sample of 4,120. Low bias was detected, and the survey data were weighted to adjust for the small amount of nonresponse bias that was found. This process was designed to ensure that all findings produced from the data are nationally representative.

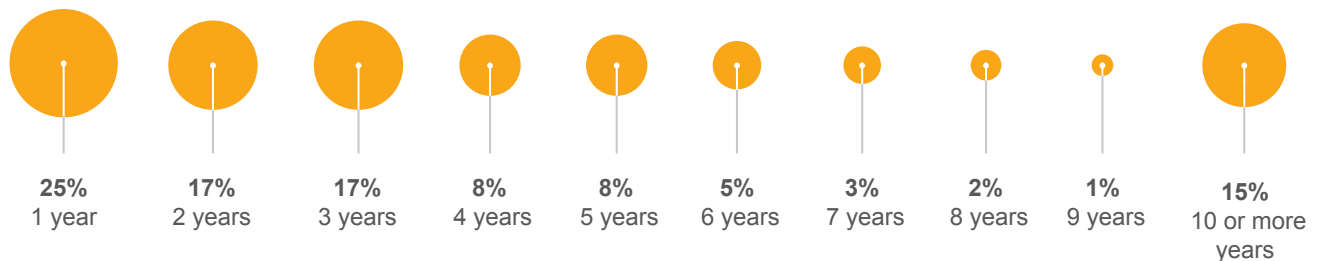
## How common are tip lines?

Just over half (51%) of public middle and high schools in the United States had a tip line in operation at the conclusion of the 2018–2019 school year.

Most tip lines are relatively new (Figure 1). About 60% of schools with tip lines reported that the tip lines had been in operation for 3 years or less. However, some schools have had tip lines in place for quite some time; 15% of schools have had a tip line in operation for 10 or more years.

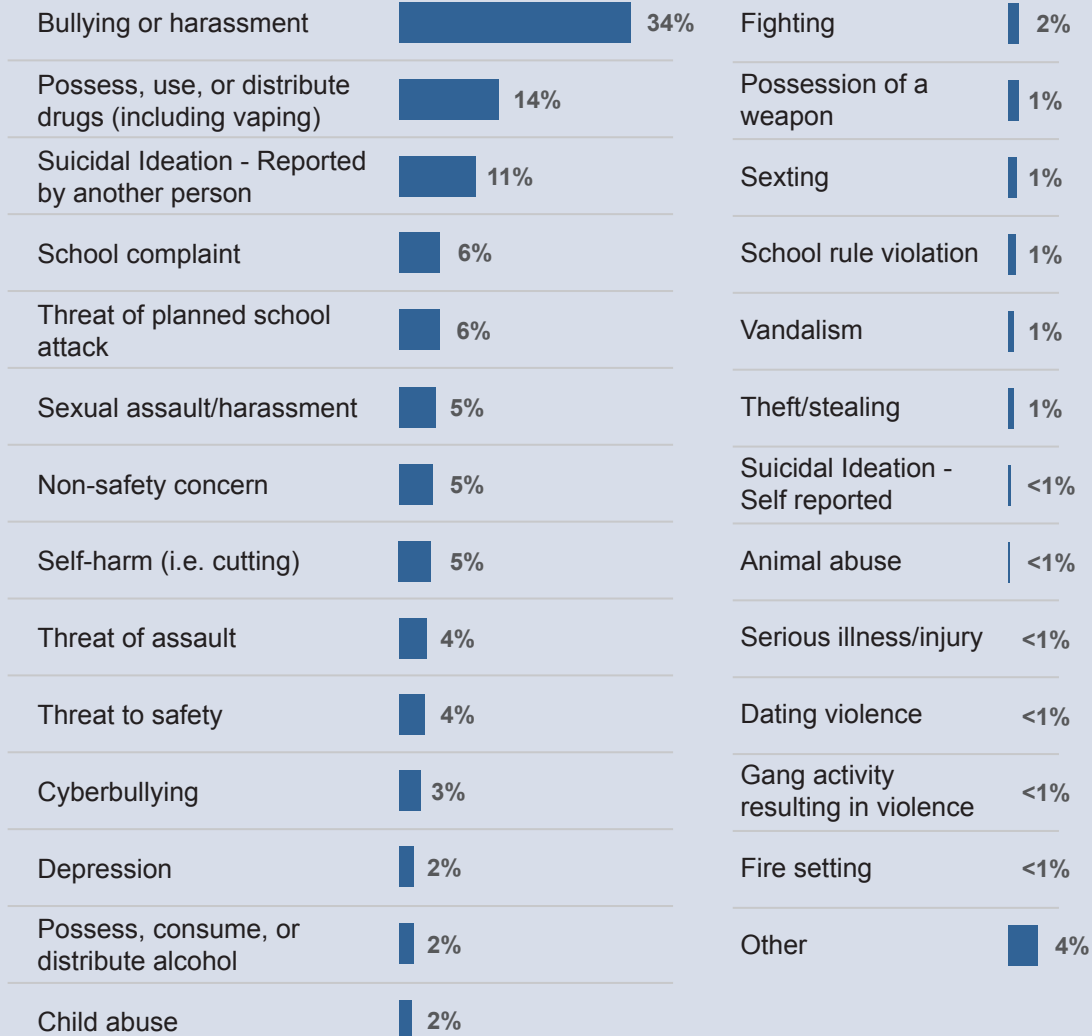
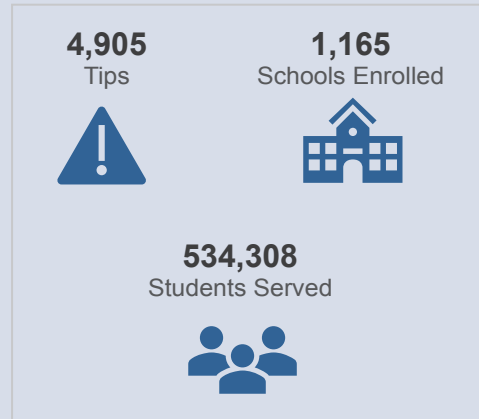


**Figure 1. Number of Years School Tip Line Has Been in Operation**



## » What types of problems are reported to tip lines?

Tip lines are not necessarily designed just to alert school safety personnel of threats of violent acts. In fact, they are a tool to identify many types of problems, such as physical threats and attacks, bullying and harassment, drug use, self-harm, suicidal ideation, sexting, and weapon carrying, among many others. This variety is illustrated in the figure below, which depicts tip types from Oregon’s SafeOregon state tip line program.



Source: SafeOregon Cumulative Data Report, 1/31/17–11/30/19



## What types of schools are most likely to have a tip line?

The types of public middle and high schools that are generally more likely to have a tip line in operation (Figure 2) include

- schools with higher student enrollment,
- schools located in suburbs rather than in cities or rural areas, and
- low-poverty schools.

### » Why don't schools have tip lines?

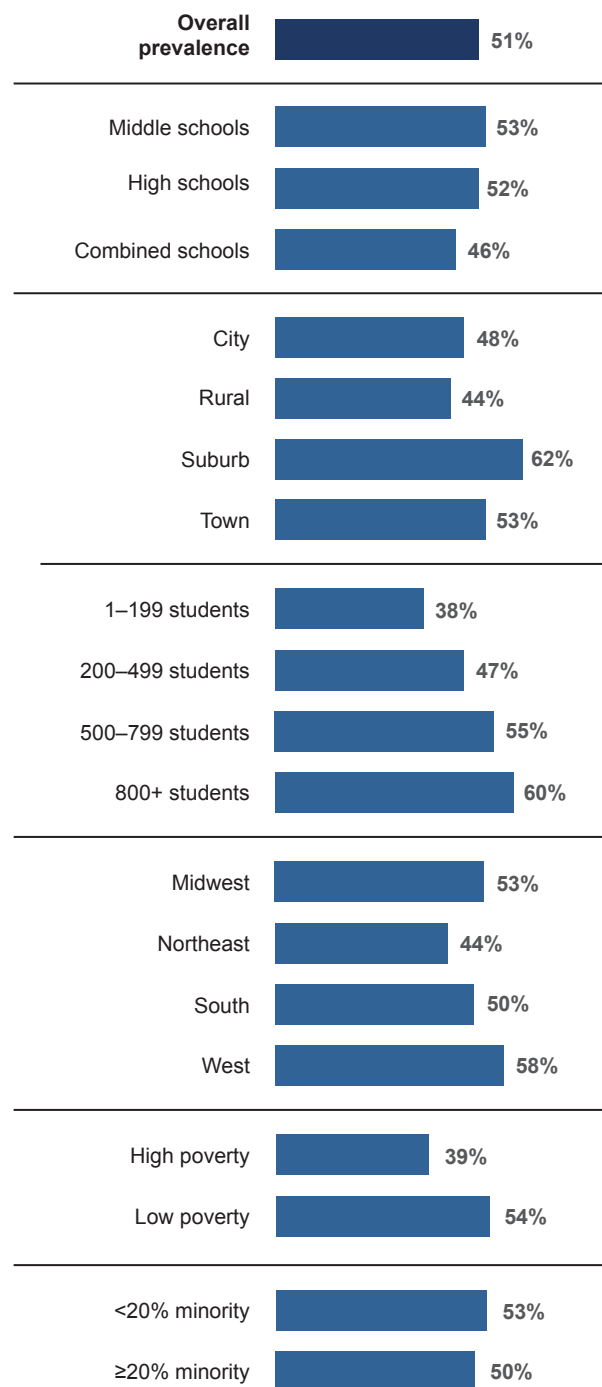
Schools without a tip line were asked why they were not using one. The most common reasons were that

- a tip line is perceived to be unnecessary because the school has other ways to share information about potential threats and school safety (43%),
- the school has an insufficient budget to implement and operate a tip line (26%), and
- the school has insufficient staff to implement and operate a tip line (21%).

Legal liability concerns (9%) and concerns about the technical expertise required (10%) were the least common reasons for not having a tip line.

About 14% of schools without a tip line reported that they were in the review, planning, or approval stages for adopting a tip line. The findings in this report can be used to help such schools think through the available options for designing a tip line, common challenges associated with operating a tip line, and partnerships involved in operating a tip line. See also Planty, M., Banks, D., Cutbush, S., & Sherwood, J. (2018). *School tip line toolkit: A blueprint for implementation and sustainability*. Research Triangle Park, NC: RTI International.

**Figure 2. Tip Line Use, by School Characteristics**



## How do tip lines fit in with other school safety practices?

Tip lines are one component of a comprehensive set of school safety practices. Figure 3 shows the use of various school safety practices among schools with and without tip lines. Schools not currently operating tip lines are

using many security procedures (e.g., metal detectors) and required practices (e.g., dress codes, book bag requirements) to protect their students.

**Figure 3. Use of Various School Safety Practices**

	<i>With Tip Lines</i>	<i>Without Tip Lines</i>
Require visitors to sign or check in	96%	98%
Security cameras to monitor the school	89%	93%
Control access to school buildings during school hours	87%	93%
Provide telephones in most classrooms	79%	78%
School resource officers (SROs)	74%	61%
Classroom doors lock from the inside	71%	75%
Provide school lockers to students	71%	77%
Require faculty and staff to wear badges or picture ID	68%	58%
Provide two-way radios to staff	58%	57%
Random dog sniffs to check for drugs	53%	52%
Electronic parent notification system for school-wide emergency	52%	61%
Close campus for all students during lunch	47%	52%
Control access to school grounds during school hours	38%	47%
“Panic button(s)” or silent alarm(s) that directly connect to law enforcement	31%	30%
Enforce a strict dress code	27%	45%
Random sweeps for contraband not including dog sniffs	19%	29%
Require students to wear badges or picture IDs	17%	17%
Require students to wear uniforms	11%	18%
Random metal detector checks on students	4%	12%
Require clear book bags or ban book bags on school grounds	4%	10%
Metal detector checks on students every day	2%	6%
Other practices*	1%	1%

\* “Other practices” included behavioral health activities, crisis response apps, drills/lockdowns, enhanced entrance protections, office call systems from the classroom, other hardware or security technology, partnerships with law enforcement or community organizations,

relationship building/communication, safety/emergency response protocols, security staff/SROs/officers, armed staff, staff training on crisis response, student search activities (e.g., drug testing, pat downs, wands), and survival kits.

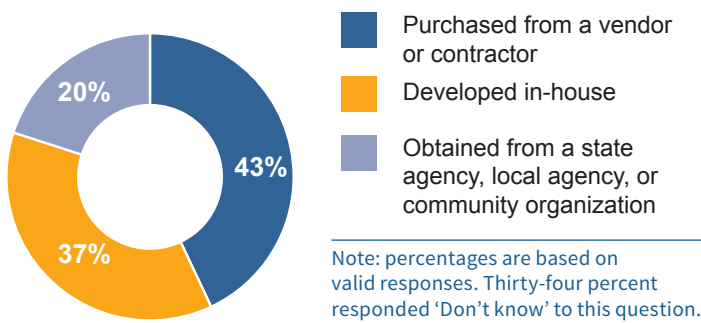


## How are tip lines developed and operated?

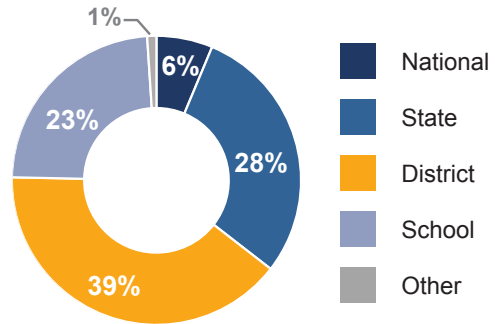
Among the schools using tip lines, 37% of the systems had been developed in house and 43% had been purchased from a vendor or contractor (Figure 4). Other options for obtaining tip lines included getting them free of charge or from a state agency, local agency, or community organization.

The most common level at which tip lines are administered is the district level (39%), although state- and school-level models are also common (Figure 5).

**Figure 4. Origin of Tip Lines**



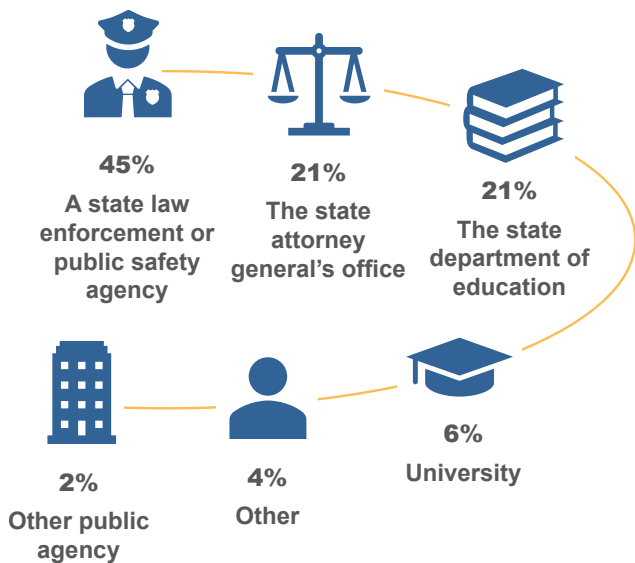
**Figure 5. Level of Tip Line Operation**



State-level tip lines are most commonly administered by a state law enforcement or public safety agency (Figure 6), whereas district-level tip lines are most

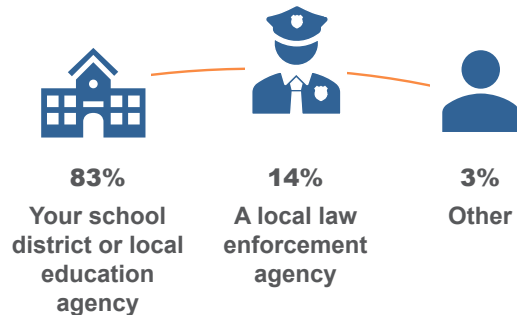
commonly administered by a school district or local education agency (Figure 7).

**Figure 6. Administration of State Tip Lines**



Note: percentages are based on valid responses. Twenty-six percent responded 'Don't know' to this question.

**Figure 7. Administration of District Tip Lines**



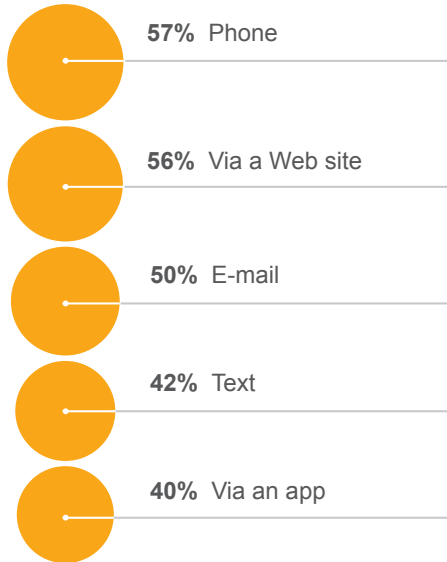
Note: percentages are based on valid responses. Three percent responded 'Don't know' to this question.

## How are tips submitted?

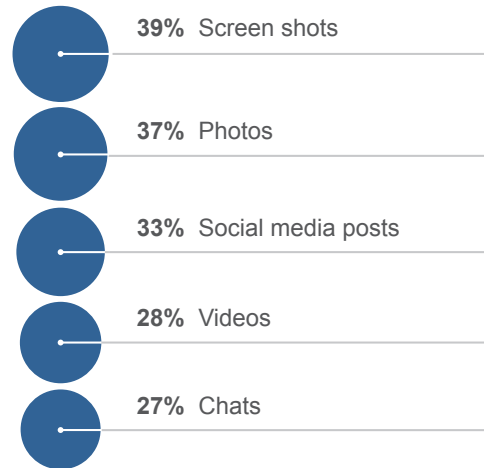
Schools reported several ways in which tips can be submitted, including via a Web site, phone, e-mail, text, or an app (Figure 8). Many tip lines are set up to accept

a variety of media, such as screen shots, photos, social media posts, and videos (Figure 9).

**Figure 8. Tip Submission Options**



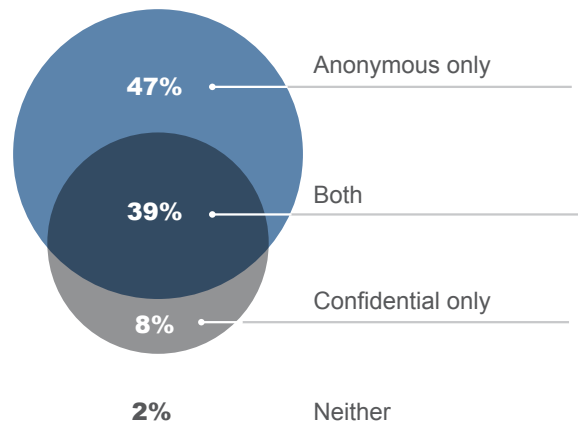
**Figure 9. Media Accepted With Tips**



One of the defining features of tip lines is that they offer a confidential or anonymous way for students, parents, and others to report information. The majority of tip lines are described to students as anonymous or as anonymous and confidential (Figure 10).<sup>2</sup>

Regardless of how they are described to students, most tip lines are set up to offer anonymity. Over three-quarters (77%) allow the reporter to submit a tip without providing personal information. At the same time, recognizing that sometimes additional information is necessary, most tip lines (61%) allow the reporters to choose whether they can be recontacted if needed, which would entail the provision of some contact information.

**Figure 10. Anonymity of Tip Lines**



<sup>2</sup> In the survey, “anonymous” was described as “persons can submit a tip without providing any information that could be used to identify them” and “confidential” was described as “information about the person who submits a tip is collected but kept private.”

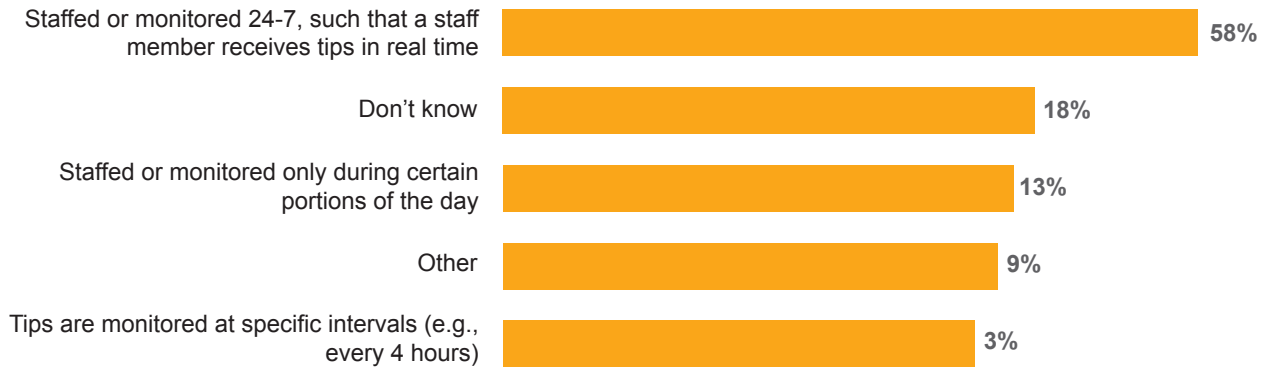
## How are tips reviewed and triaged?

Over half of tip lines are staffed or monitored 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, such that a staff member receives calls, texts, or other entries in real time (Figure 11). However, a sizable percentage of respondents were unsure about how their tip line was staffed.

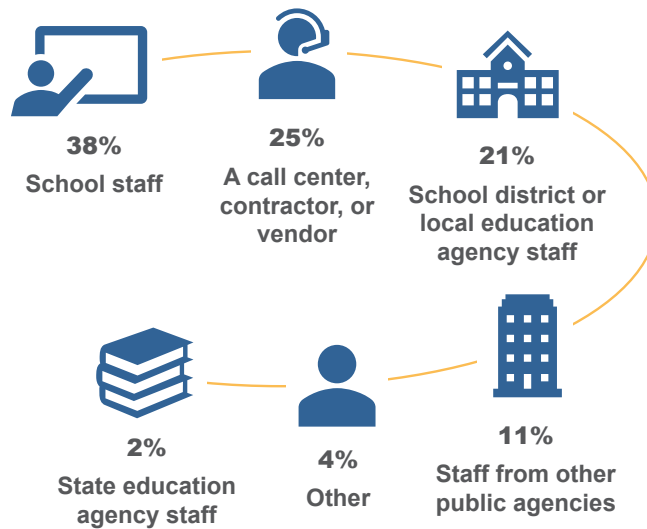
The stakeholder who receives a tip upon initial submission (for triage or forwarding to others) is most commonly a school staff member. This was the case for more than one-third of schools. About a quarter of schools said that a call center, contractor, or vendor receives the tips initially (Figure 12).

Only about a quarter (24%) of respondents reported that they had a formal, written policy detailing the process for triaging tips (i.e., prioritizing or categorizing them based on level of urgency) when the tips first get submitted. Slightly more (35%) said that they had a formal, written policy detailing the process for acting on tips when their school gets them. Many tip lines have built-in procedures to ensure that a tip is not missed. These include distribution of tips to multiple staff trained to respond (51%); a confirmation process to acknowledge that a tip has been received (41%); a communication tree such that if the first individual is not reached, a second is contacted (17%); and other procedures (4%).

**Figure 11. Process for Reviewing Tips**



**Figure 12. Responsibility for Review of Incoming Tips**



## » Insights Into Triaging and Acting on Tips

Open-ended survey responses describing schools' processes for triaging and acting on tips showed substantial variability across schools. Whereas some tip lines are structured to prioritize tips on the basis of urgency (e.g., self-harm), others use a first-come, first-served approach. Not surprisingly, given that many tip lines are operated at the district or state level and often involve law enforcement partners, some tip lines are structured so that tips are reviewed by a law enforcement agency or call center before being directed to the school. Other options are for tips to be simultaneously routed to the school and a local law enforcement agency or to be routed only to the school. The procedures for staff review of the tips vary widely (e.g., a single gatekeeper or multiple staff involved in reviewing a tip). The process for group decision making (e.g., whether the first person who sees the tip is expected to act or a group discussion precedes action) also differs, as does the manner in which key partners are looped in based on the nature of the tip.

Nuances by time of day, school size, and the types of state and local partners involved also influenced the triage and response process. For example, some schools noted that school administrators handled tips received during school hours and law enforcement agencies handled after-hours tips. Smaller schools often reported having a single point person and acting on each tip immediately, whereas larger schools were more likely to report using a triage process and involving multiple partners in the response.

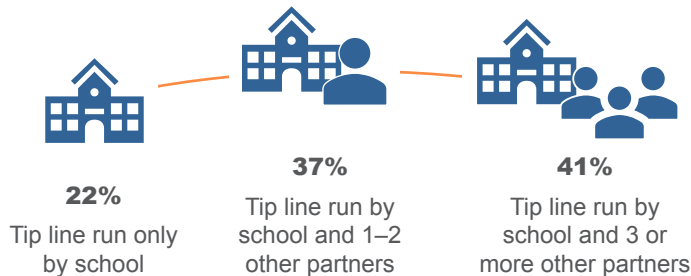
The built-in redundancies used by many tip lines, particularly the simultaneous distribution of tips to multiple staff, do suggest the need for a more structured, clearly defined process. Some respondents perceived that tips were often met with independent (and often uncoordinated) action on the part of several actors, which created inefficiencies and confusion.

## What types of **partnerships** are in place to implement tip lines?

Developing a broad-based coalition of active partners is a recommended practice for tip lines to establish buy-in, increase awareness, and promote long-term sustainability.<sup>3</sup> However, not all schools appear to be involving external partners in their tip line

administration (Figure 13). About 22% of schools have no additional partners actively involved in their tip line program, and another 37% have just one or two other partners.

**Figure 13. Number of Active Partners Involved in Tip Line Administration**



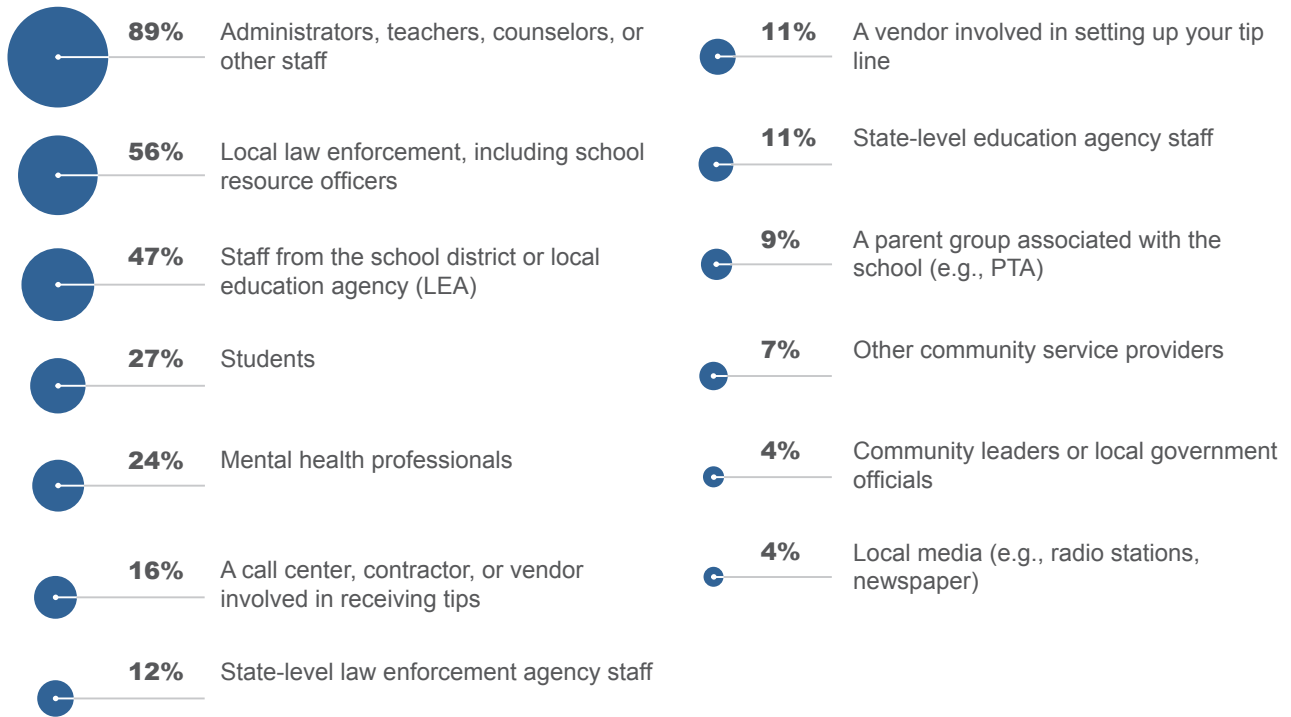
Note: Eleven percent of schools were not actively involved as partners in the school's tip line.

<sup>3</sup>Planty, M., Banks, D., Cutbush, S., & Sherwood, J. (2018). *School tip line toolkit: a blueprint for implementation and sustainability*. Research Triangle Park, NC: RTI International.

Furthermore, there appears to be a need for better strategies to involve some critical external partners. Although administrators, teachers, counselors, and other school staff are active partners in the vast majority of tip lines (89%), local law enforcement

officers (including school resource officers) are actively engaged in only 56% of tip lines and students in just 27%. Parent groups and mental health professionals are also uncommon partners (Figure 14).

**Figure 14. Active Partners Involved in Tip Line**



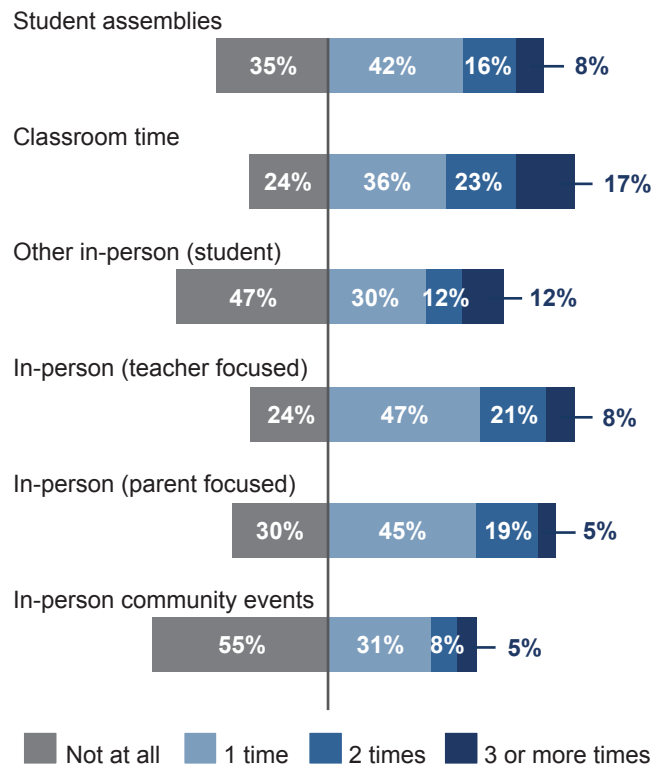
For each active partner, the survey captured information about the ways in which that partner is involved in the tip line's operation. School staff (including administrators, teachers, counselors, or other school staff) were commonly involved in all roles, including investigating tips (71%), marketing to students (66%), making referrals (62%), providing services (59%), and reviewing and prioritizing tips (53%). School district or local education agency staff were also involved in all roles, but with a lower

frequency (20–30% of schools reported that these partners were involved in the various roles). Local law enforcement staff were primarily involved in investigating tips (51%), providing services (29%), and reviewing and prioritizing tips (28%). Students' primary role was making referrals (20%), and the primary role of mental health professionals was to provide services (23%). Call center, contractor, or vendor staff were involved in reviewing and prioritizing tips for 13% of schools.

## How are schools raising awareness to encourage tip line use?

Raising awareness on the availability of a tip line and getting students to submit tips in the correct way for the right types of incidents is critical to tip line success. It is therefore useful to consider schools' strategies for raising students' awareness of their tip lines. As illustrated in Figure 15, in-person activities are uncommon. Most schools either do not engage in in-person activities or do so only once a year.

**Figure 15. Frequency of In-Person Awareness - Raising Activities**

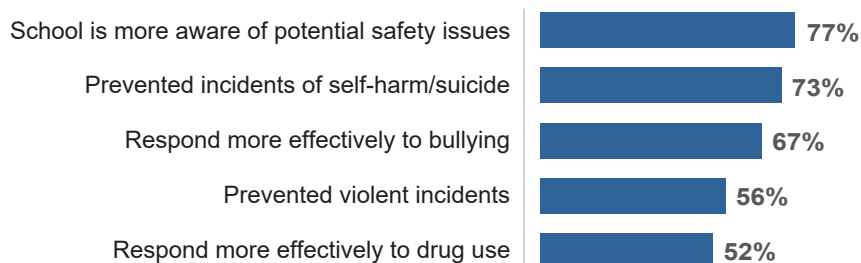


## What benefits do school administrators see from their tip lines?

In schools that are using tip lines, principals and school safety personnel identified several benefits from their tip lines (Figure 16). Overall, 77% of survey respondents believed that their schools' tip lines made them more aware of potential safety issues at their schools. Over half of survey respondents said that their schools' tip lines had prevented violent incidents and had allowed the

school to respond more effectively to drug use. Two-thirds believed that their tip lines allowed their schools to respond more effectively to bullying, and around three-quarters reported that their tip lines had prevented incidents of self-harm or suicide among their schools' students.

**Figure 16. Perceived Benefits of Tip Lines**





## What are the challenges with operating tip lines?

The biggest challenge to operating tip lines, according to schools using them, is tips submitted with insufficient information for the school to act on (Figure 17), either about the problem, persons involved, or school location. The interrelated issues of lack of student awareness and lack of student-submitted tips were also among the most common challenges, along with false or bogus tips and tips that were beyond the scope of the tip line. The least common challenges were technological and legal liability issues, established points of contact (POCs), and insufficient staff (and staff training).

**Figure 17. Challenges in Operating a Tip Line**

Tips submitted with insufficient information	41%
Raising student awareness	36%
Getting students to submit tips	36%
False/bogus tips	36%
Out-of-scope tips	31%
Raising community awareness	29%
Insufficient staff to triage	9%
Insufficient staff training	8%
Insufficient staff to respond to tips	8%
Establishing/keeping POCs up to date	7%
Legal liability issues	7%
Technological challenges/issues	5%

## Conclusions

This study, as the first nationally representative assessment of tip lines in the United States, found that just over half of public and middle high schools are operating tip lines and that tip lines are more common among larger schools, suburban schools, and low-poverty schools. Most tip lines have been implemented within the past 3 years, and they are substantially diverse in design and operation (e.g., the level at which they are operated, the procedures for reviewing and triaging tips), as well as in the coalitions involved in their operation. The findings of this study show that efforts are needed to involve more stakeholders as active partners in tip line operation, particularly engaging students as active tip line users, involving parents, and developing stronger partnerships with mental health providers. These partnerships could help raise students' awareness of their schools' tip lines, encourage the submission of tips, and ensure the adequate provision of mental and behavioral health referrals and services to students in need.

Given the challenges to operating tip lines that respondents identified, more intensive efforts are also

needed to raise student awareness about tip lines, educate students about the types of issues that tip lines are designed to deal with, and train students on how to submit tips with sufficient information for their schools to act on. Such efforts may require in-person events and training with students (as well as parents and teachers), which are currently held infrequently.

Encouragingly, tip lines were largely perceived as effective by most school principals (or other school safety personnel who completed the survey). Survey respondents said that tip lines had improved their schools' ability to respond to a diverse set of issues, including self-harm, drug use, and bullying, in addition to safety concerns. Further research is needed to understand whether implementation of a tip line is associated with changes in school safety and disciplinary outcomes (based on school-level data) and to identify characteristics of tip lines that are associated with better outcomes. This research will help to establish an evidence base for identifying promising practices in the use of tip lines.

