What Do Students Say About School Safety?

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ACT® Center for Equity in Learning

Conclusions

Safety is an important condition for student learning. According to research on the science of learning, a supportive school environment—one that creates a sense of safety and belonging in school—improves learning outcomes.[1] This brief summarizes students' responses to an open-ended survey question that asked them to document their thoughts, feelings, and concerns about school safety. Students elaborated on their sense of safety, told us how well their school kept them safe, provided suggestions to improve safety, and provided their reasoning for or against a proposal to train and arm educators in school.

So What?

Only half of students feel safe at school and 51% reported that their school provides a false sense of security, according to a recent Safe and Sound Schools survey.[2] In that report, students thought their voices were unheard in school safety decision-making, and that adults often overlooked important physical safety and mental health issues. The current paper remedies this by giving voice to what students have said on school safety. Students' comments about school safety can inform how to think about local and national solutions on the issue.

Now What?

We offer two recommendations for policymakers and educators:

- Federal and state funding should promote the availability and improve the access and quality of school mental health services.

- Policymakers should include students' perspectives when considering which school safety measures to implement.

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Introduction

Safety is an important condition for student learning. Research on the science of learning indicates that a supportive school environment—one that creates a sense of safety and belonging in school—improves learning outcomes.[1] According to the Safe and Sound Schools survey, only half of students feel safe while at school and 51% reported that their school provides a false sense of security.[2] Furthermore, students thought their voices were unheard on decisions about school safety, and that adults often overlooked important physical safety and mental health issues. To better understand how students perceive their physical safety in school, ACT surveyed high school students who took the ACT® test as part of a national administration in October 2018.[3] We asked students about their physical safety in school, including:

• school climate;

• the types of safety measures their school currently implements;

• the types of measures they would prefer to have to make them feel safer; and

• whether they would favor or oppose specific safety policy measures.

The survey results were summarized in *Creating Safe Schools: Examining Student Perceptions of their Physical Safety at School.*[4] Generally, students felt safe in school; however, schools' security measures varied by school size and school location. Students identified mental health services as an area for improvement. Student demographics were related to attitudes about which safety measures should be added.

This brief takes a closer look at one survey question that asked students to explain, in their own words, any additional thoughts they might have on their school's safety. A total of 1,984 students (12% of survey participants) responded to the question. We categorized their comments into themes, and highlight the complexity and nuance of their responses (see the appendix for a description of this process).[5]

This report includes direct quotes from students, some of which include sensitive material. We include these quotes verbatim so that the reader can better understand students' thoughts, feelings, and concerns about school safety **in the students' own words**. We hope these findings provide information for what district and school leaders should consider when selecting and implementing safety measures.
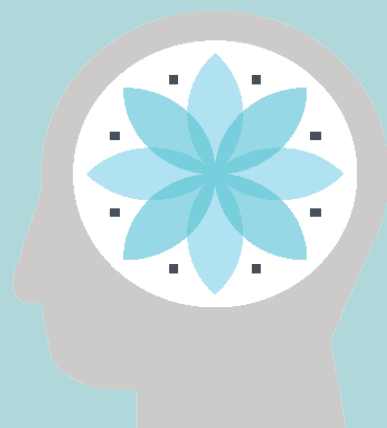
Key Findings

- 24% of students elaborated on their sense of safety at school in an open-ended question; of these students, three out of four felt safe, 17% had mixed feelings about their safety, and 9% felt unsafe.

- 19% of students told us how well they thought their school was doing keeping them safe. Students reported safety issues associated with having to travel outside between buildings for class, buildings that did not have locked doors, a lack of proper emergency plans or drills, or school staff not doing enough about school threats.

- 28% of students suggested what schools should start doing or stop doing to make them feel safe. The most frequently offered suggestions addressed increasing mental health resources, including the need for more school counselors (referenced by 17% of these students).

- 7.5% of all open-ended responses discussed how security staff (i.e., school resource officers and/or other school security personnel) influence their feelings of safety at their school.

- 17% of students offered their opinions on whether or not they thought guns have a place in their schools; 67% indicated they did not want teachers or administrators to have guns, while 21% agreed that these individuals should be armed.

Although these responses were collected prior to the widespread coronavirus school closures in the spring of 2020, the responses provide valuable information that should be considered as students return to school buildings.

School Climate

Overall, students felt safe in school. While 91% of students "somewhat agreed" to "strongly agreed" that they felt safe at school,[6] 485 students elaborated on their sense of safety in an open-ended question. These feelings varied from feeling safe (75%), having mixed feelings about their safety at school (17%), or not feeling safe in their school at all (9%; Figure 1).

Figure 1. Percentage of Students who Reported Feeling Safe, Feeling Unsafe, or Had Mixed Feelings About Their Safety in School
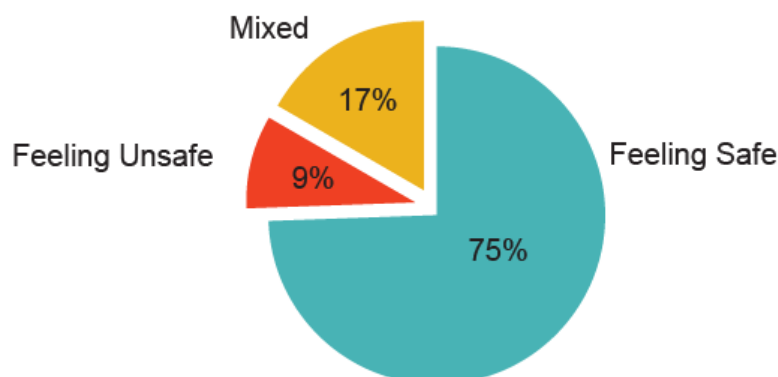
Feeling Safe. Most students stated that their school was safe, omitting an explanation for their answer. A few examples from students who elaborated stated include: "My school is very safe and I love going to school every day" and "My school's safety is great! I have always felt safe there since kindergarten." Other students provided more detailed explanations as to why they felt safe, reporting that a safe school was one where faculty and staff were attentive to students' needs, security measures were effectively implemented, or the school was in a safe and supportive community. In commenting about having appropriate security measures, two examples illustrate this point:

> I think our school is safe because it has a strong system of discipline. As soon as a student shows any sign of violence or brings even a pocket knife, they are given consequences (sent to in school detention, possibly suspended, etc.)."

> I feel pretty safe at my school. There are many security cameras in and out of our school. Police officers are often walking in the hallway to make sure everything is safe. Faculty and staff are always watching us students in the morning when student drivers come to school, in the lunchroom, and out in the hallway."

Another student felt safe because their school responded appropriately to an emergency:

> Being a student at [redacted] High School, a location of a shooting, the only 2 entrances that are always unlocked always have security staff, with others around campus, and it feels very safe. The changes they made have been very effective and make us all feel safe."

Other students felt safe at school because they lived in a small or close community:

> I feel that my school is generally safe because we live in a rural area. I do not feel that there is a strong need for more security as there is no ever-present threat to my safety."

> My school is very safe they are a close community and even if there is a threat they take it seriously the priority is safety of the students police officers from the community check around and the business around help too [sic]."

Feeling Unsafe. A smaller, but meaningful, number of students had concerns or worries about their safety at school. They described being distracted, on edge, or nervous because of an event they experienced personally. For example, one student described a gun incident at school:

> Recently one of the students at my school was caught carrying a gun. I felt unsafe because we don't have any type of metal detectors at my school to search out students [who might bring a gun to school]."

Additionally, students relayed stories about racism, sexism, or bullying and harassment regarding sexual orientation. For example, one student specifically commented on their experience with racism at their school:

> First and foremost, letting the male students in our school wear confederacy related clothing makes students uncomfortable and it is absolutely racist … educate the students, that racism is not okay and that what they say will not only get them in trouble but that it's awful. Racist comments shouldn't be ignored. Give them more so they learn from their comments."

Another student described their experience with homophobia:

> There have been many cases where LGBTQ+ students have been threatened and harassed by other students—such as myself. There have been so many instances where I have been afraid to walk alone throughout the school. There have been too many instances where I could not think in class because of this fear. And while my school says that these issues are taken seriously, they are not. The harasser is punished with a slap on the wrist and the possibility of detention, then sent on his way. My intentions are not to attack teachers and other staff, but it is the truth. While most teachers and staff love their students and step in to situations when necessary, they can only do so much. I do not know how you can use this information—but something has to be done."

Students discussed feeling unsafe because they were nervous about the potential for a school shooting. For example, one student said, "the thought of a potential shooting has me in constant fear throughout the day."

Although the overwhelming majority of individuals with mental illness are not violent,[7] students expressed concern that mental health needs were not being addressed:

> I think it's safer from the outside than the inside. Troubled students aren't focused on or given any therapy or help. They are more a threat of safety to me than a man from the outside coming in and shooting up my school."

Mixed Feelings of Safety. Students who had mixed feelings about being safe at school said they were safe but went on to express general concerns about their safety or elaborate on an experience that made them feel less safe. For example, one student said, "it's usually pretty safe but every once in a while I get a little scared."

Another student, referencing an experience at school, said,

> " I believe my school is somewhat safe. Then again, I don't believe my school is safe. We've had scared [sic] before and I felt helpless. My teacher did not take the right actions like we were taught. We called for a lockdown (not a soft one). He made us sit in our desks and continue doing what we were doing. He didn't seem concerned at all even when we could all tell something was wrong by all the police running down the hallways. I was directly in front of the door window and I felt absolutely helpless. I think our teachers need to take the right actions even in soft lockdowns."

Other students had mixed feelings about their safety at school because they worried about what might happen or they believed the current safety measures could be better. For example, one student commented on the variability of school shootings. They said:

> " It's not that I feel my school is unsafe. School shootings can happen absolutely anywhere, and I feel like it wouldn't be possible to rule my school out because of that."

A student commented on the use of metal detectors:

> " I feel that my school is safe, but it could be safer. If we put metal detectors at the front doors that would stop everyone from bringing weapons into the school."

Evaluation of Their Schools' Safety

A total of 376 students, almost one in five (19%), who provided open-ended responses talked about how well they thought their school kept them safe. While some students referenced the good work their schools were doing, most students said their schools could improve. Students reported safety issues associated with having to travel outside between buildings for class, buildings that did not have locked doors, a lack of proper emergency plans or drills, or school staff not doing enough about school threats. For example, one student mentioned that:

> " I already feel unsafe going to school every day because my school does not address how to handle a school shooting situation. We have had gun threats before and the school does not do anything about it and I do not think they take it as seriously as they should. Students should not have to go to school every day with the fear of being shot."

Some students identified specific incidents that made them question how safe they were in their school with current safety plans in place. For example, six students discussed experiences when knives or guns were brought to school by other students or when other acts of violence occurred. One student recalled:
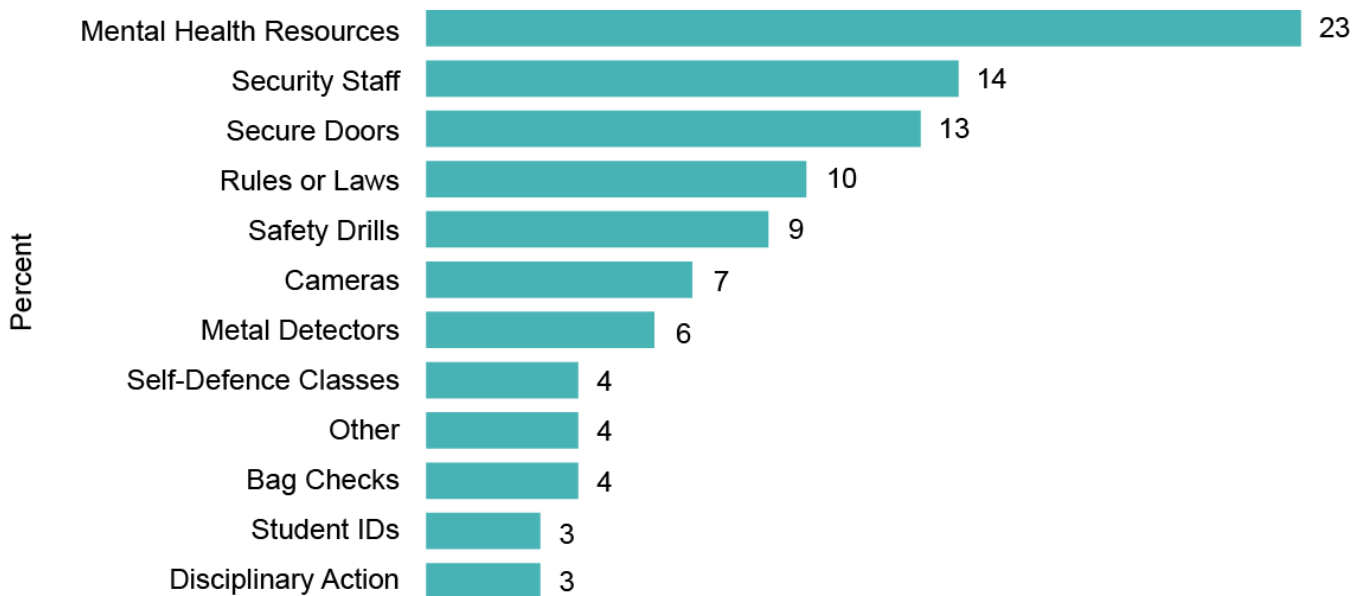
> " When a former student attempted an attack on my school at the end of last year, I did not feel like my school was a safe place or that it was handled well. I believe that situation has been swept under the rug and there are still things that need to be addressed in the aftermath of what happened."

What Schools Should Start or Stop Doing

A total of 549 students suggested safety measures they believe should be implemented or added at their school; the most frequently offered suggestions addressed increasing mental health resources (23% of respondents; see Figure 2).[4]

MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES

Figure 2. Percentage of Students Requesting Additional School Safety Measures

Mental Health Resources — 23
Security Staff — 14
Secure Doors — 13
Rules or Laws — 10
Safety Drills — 9
Cameras — 7
Metal Detectors — 6
Self-Defence Classes — 4
Other — 4
Bag Checks — 4
Student IDs — 3
Disciplinary Action — 3

Percent

Note: Students discussed security staff in two primary ways. First, they discussed needing more or needing staff if there was not one at the school currently. Second, students discussed the quality of the staff they currently have. Those in the second group are not represented in the figure but are discussed in more detail later in the paper.

Other students offered more complex suggestions related to rules in their school or state and federal law. For example, one student, describing a potential state and/or federal law change, specifically mentioned gun control and what should be done about it. They explained:

> I wish gun laws were more strict. I know teachers carrying guns at my school would help but it's just a Band-Aid idea…We need guns regulated, not spread even more. It would be stupid to fight fire with fire when the government has a power to stop it all together."

Only 30 students suggested things that they hoped their school would stop doing in relation to safety measures. Suggestions for what measures to reduce or do away with included staff, cameras, and metal detectors because they were intrusive or a distraction to learning. For example, one student said:

> Putting extra security on children just makes us feel constantly watched, uncomfortable and it feels like punishment. Clear backpacks are not an effective solution because you could easily hide a handgun in a binder. [Security staff] are also a waste of public money because they are rarely useful in most schools."

Based on these suggestions, we argue that it is important to obtain students' perspectives on current and future safety initiatives in and around schools. Gathering this information may not only help students to feel safer at school, but it may help them feel as though they are a part of the decision-making process, and therefore agents of their own environment.

Increasing Mental Health Resources & Counselors

According to a prior ACT report,[8] while 97% of students indicated they had access to a mental health professional (e.g., counselor, psychologist, psychiatrist, or nurse), one in three students indicated they did not know if they had access to specific mental health services (e.g., addressing drug and alcohol abuse, managing anger, or addressing bullying) that these professionals provide. It is not surprising then that **almost 1 in 4 students provided open-ended responses mentioning mental health services, making it the most frequently requested measure** that schools should enact or increase.

In their open-ended responses, students discussed why they wanted more mental health resources, or how the current system at their school was ignoring important student needs.

It is important to note that people with mental illness are not more likely to commit violence against others. There is an inncorrect public perception that mental illness and violence are linked more closely than they actually are.[9] However, providing school-based mental services is related to reduced suspensions, expulsions, and disciplinary rates for other infractions, which may help to improve school climate and general student well-being.[10]

Students wanted more mental health resources to increase their feelings of safety. Students discussed how mental health should be a top priority for school safety. One student said:

> Mental health should be the first place schools turn to for school safety."

Another mentioned that sometimes,

> Troubled students aren't focused on or given any therapy or help."

Even when considering potential threats to safety or focus for safety measures, students felt that school leaders need to put an emphasis on general regard for students' mental health and well-being. Some students felt that their school only cared about how they were doing in the classroom and nothing more. One student said:

> " No one seems to care how we are doing mentally, as long as we do well on tests and assignments. That's all that really matters to them. The fact that some individuals have panic attacks at the mere thought of going to school should say something about how things are being run."

Students also said that the way their school provided mental health resources was insufficient or hindered students from getting help. Students thought their needs were being ignored, not fully attended to, or that blame was placed elsewhere. One student noted:

> " The school system as a whole largely goes about mental health education and services completely wrong and ineffectively and I believe it would be more beneficial to listen to students more and bring in real mental health professionals for more than just one day a year. Schools and the staff there (and for the most part the system and government officials behind the school system as a whole) need to take students seriously in what they say their stresses are and really start collaborating with them to fix issues instead of blaming everything on modern technology and whatnot."

Additionally, students stated they wished more school counselors were available at school. This discussion made up 17% of all responses that referenced mental health. Students commented that while they may have services for mental health and counseling at their school, these services either were not enough or were unhelpful. Students discussed why their mental health resources should be improved or expanded upon. For example, one student commented:

> " My school is clearly trying to create a safe learning environment. However, I feel they could improve by offering mental health services. What happens is that the guidance counselors and school psychologist are a mere reroute to actual therapists, and thus they themselves cannot offer any help to students. If they were trained in basic therapy they may be able to do more to help students."

Students emphasized that adding more mental health resources in their schools was imperative to school safety, it could help reduce potential incidents of violence, and create a more supportive environment. For example, one student mentioned:

> " I would feel a lot safer at my school if students had a better support system and a place to go when they are struggling with mental and emotional health."

School Security Staff

According to a recent report, during the 2017–18 school year, approximately 51% of U.S. public schools had a school resource officer (i.e., "sworn law enforcement officers who are responsible for safety and crime prevention in schools")[11] at school at least once a week.[12] Approximately 51% had officers who participated in student discipline, but less than half of those schools had a formal policy that described the student resource officer's role related to discipline (43%).

School resource officers who act as security staff can be controversial, especially if lower-level disciplinary offenses are escalated and result in increased referrals to law enforcement, which may disproportionately impact black students.[13] For instance, according to NCES data,[14] of schools with a sworn law enforcement officer, the majority had policies that include language related to reporting criminal offenses to a law enforcement agency (65%) and related to making arrests on school grounds (56%).

Supporters contend that there are benefits to hiring security staff, including the reduction of property damage, student injuries, and 911 calls, as well as potential increases in feelings of safety among students and staff.[15]

The results of our survey show that in total, 150 students (7.5% of all open-ended responses) discussed how security staff (i.e., school resource officers and/or other school security personnel) influence their feelings of safety at their school. As the survey was focused on additional safety measures, student responses skewed towards requesting additional security staff and discussing the quality of the security provided by those staff. We suspect that if we had asked students their opinion about security staff, their open-ended responses would have been different. Similarly, given recent scrutiny of law enforcement practices, student views of security staff in 2020 may be different than in 2018 when the survey was administered.[16]

Some students mentioned that the quantity of security staff in their school needs to be increased in general, particularly due to a large student body or campus. One student said:

> My school really need more security guards to walk the school area. Maybe like 3 or so due to our school only has [sic] 1 officer walking the premise at any given time."

Other students expressed the desire for providing security staff who were armed or wanting a wider variety of officers patrolling the school. For example, one student mentioned that having an armed officer may prevent a shooting from happening in the first place. They commented that:

> I would support having an armed, trained security officer at the school. I think it would deter a possible shooter. Might be smart to have the officer be undercover, as it might draw a lot of attention."

Students also discussed the quality of the security staff at their schools. Some students worried that while they had security staff, those staff were not adequately prepared for an emergency. For example, some students talked about how age was a factor in regard to the quality of their schools' security staff. Students felt security officers should not be older adults. One student said:

> They have some measures to protect our school but I do not think it is enough. To be honest, most of our security guards are 55+. I don't feel they could protect us if need be."

Others highlighted that their schools' security staff were not trained professionals but rather former faculty and staff. Since these individuals were not properly trained in security, students did not feel safe having them as their protection or in the event of an emergency. For example, one student said:

> The current security staff are composed of retired teachers and coaches. We should have better trained security with experience in handling weapons."

Some students also worried that security staff who serve double duty as school faculty may be preoccupied with concerns other than student safety. For example, one student said:

> My school could definitely use some security officers. I believe that we have a police officer employed at my school, but he is more so involved in teaching academic courses rather than keeping public safety."

A few students discussed positive experiences with the quality of their schools' security staff. Security staff made them feel welcome and safe, and there were enough security officers for their schools. For example, some students discussed how much their security staff were appreciated in their schools. One student said:

> I believe my school to be very safe. We have an outdoor campus and have yet to have any incidents. We always have security who are trusted and loved."

Figure 3. School Characteristics and Employing Security Staff

Note: There was no statistical relationship between having security staff and race/ethnicity of the student. However, as noted in our 2019 report, *Creating Safe Schools*, African American students reported feeling less safe than their White counterparts.

From our initial survey, we wanted to more closely examine the types of schools that employed security staff and the relationship between security staff and school climate. Students attending either suburban or urban schools were more likely to have a security officer than rural schools, and the likelihood of having security staff increased with school size (Figure 3).

Regarding school climate,[17] students attending urban schools that had security staff generally had similar feelings of safety within their schools compared to students attending urban schools that did not have security staff (90% vs. 92%). They also had similar feelings of safety when traveling to and from school (96% vs. 95%). However, students in urban schools that had security staff were more likely to report that there were gangs at their school (27% vs. 16%) than students in urban schools without security staff. They were also less likely to agree that students rarely get physically hurt (76% vs. 86%) or that theft does not happen much in the school (65% vs. 76%) compared to urban students whose schools did not employ security staff. Therefore, it may be that the schools had specific school crime issues that prompted the hiring of security staff.

Proposal to Train Teachers to Carry Firearms

Because arming school faculty and staff has been proposed by the US Department of Education as a school safety measure, students were asked multiple questions about the effectiveness of the proposal. Likely due to the inclusion of these items, students offered their opinions on whether or not they thought guns have a place in their schools. A total of 347 students commented on this topic (17% of all comments collected). In sum, 234 students (67% of responses on the topic) did not want teachers or administrators to have guns, while 74 students (21% of responses on the topic) agreed that these individuals should be armed.[18] A total of 64 students (18% of responses on the topic)[19] articulated the pros and cons of training educators, presented an alternative to educators carrying guns, or requested more details on how the policy would be enacted.

Opposed to Arming Teachers. Students who did not want faculty and staff to be armed at their school cited reasons for their opinion. Rationales included that arming teachers would make their school more dangerous, having weapons in the classroom would disrupt learning, and it would create a hostile environment if teachers who were not trusted were given a gun. As students may already feel anxious about going to school, adding armed instructors to this equation may hinder more than help. Some students mentioned that they were not only worried about their teachers being armed, but that they would be scared for their safety. One student commented:

> There are some safety concerns, but putting a gun in a teacher's hand would not make me feel safe. I would be more worried about the teacher hurting me or my peers."

If an instructor needs to defend their classroom, students voiced that they would be nervous that their teacher would accidently hit them or one of their classmates if they fired at an intruder. Also, students mentioned that having a gun in the classroom could put students on edge and distract them in their learning. One student said:

> I feel like bringing weapons into the classroom would make the students a lot more nervous and impair their learning. It decreases the learning of many of the students because they have that thought in their minds that someone could come into the school and that their teacher has a weapon that they could use, in theory, at any time. It also could get stolen and get used against them. That's not a likely situation, but still a possibility."

Even if a teacher is not actively using a weapon, students voiced concern that simply knowing that it is in the classroom and could be used may make students uneasy because of the repercussions of arming teachers. Students identified issues such as the potential for other students to gain access to a teacher's gun and other scenarios of what could potentially go wrong if more guns were added to their schools. For example, one student commented on potential problems that may come about if teachers were armed:

> I think that teachers with guns would cause more problems. Imagine a student somehow getting ahold of a teacher's gun. Imagine if a teacher falsely thought a student had a gun and shot them. Imagine a teacher trying to fire at a shooter and hitting a student instead. Even with training, teachers are not police officers or soldiers."

In sum, students in this category considered putting more guns in schools as making the problem of school safety worse. As one student said, "Instead of fighting guns with more guns, we should actually do something about the problem itself."

In Favor of Arming Teachers. Students who proposed their teachers be armed (21% of students who commented on the topic of arming school staff) wanted this for an added layer of security and protection in the event of a mass shooting threat. Some reasons students cited for this were that it would make schools safer, allow for a more immediate response to an active shooter situation, or add a feeling of protection for students.

First, students mentioned that if their teachers were armed, then they would feel safer in school. For example, one student mentioned:

> I personally believe that an armed staff is a safe staff. History has taught that those who are armed and trained protect [more] innocent lives than those who aren't."

Students also thought that properly trained and armed teachers would enable them to intervene in an emergency before police arrived. Students referenced the phrase "the only way to stop a bad guy with a gun is a good guy with a gun." One student said:

> The only way to stop a shooter is with another gun. At most schools police are at least 15 minutes away, you can't count on them to get there in time. Having armed staff and teachers offers a much more immediate defense against shooters. I feel much safer having trained and armed teachers and staff on campus."

Finally, students would feel a sense of protection if their instructors were armed. They hoped that in the event of a shooting, their teachers would be able to defend them from a potential attack. One student commented:

> Equipping teachers with firearms would not only provide defense during an actual school shooting, but would also assure students that if they were ever in danger someone would be there to protect them."

Other Comments Related to Arming Teachers. Some students did not state explicitly their opinion to the proposal to train educators to carry firearms in schools. Instead, these students articulated the pros and cons of the proposal, under which circumstances they might consider it, or indicated that the proposal is not fully developed enough to make an informed decision.

Some students indicated both benefits and drawbacks to arming teachers. Most of these students indicated that arming teachers might be a benefit in an emergency situation, but that carrying might decrease students' everyday sense of safety outside of this scenario. One student said,

> Arming teachers/other staff with guns is a good idea in theory; however, during the chaos of a mass shooting, there would not be a way for them to specifically target out the shooter (no matter how much training said staff had)."

Students mentioned a need for specific and clear protocols about how weapons would be handled, stored, and used if teachers were to be armed. Students also said that they felt that only certain instructors should be armed and that students should be able to offer input as to which teachers they trusted the most, as certain teachers having guns would make them more scared in the classroom. For example, one student noted:

> [T]here are certain teachers (not all!) who should be trained and armed for the betterment of the safety of students. Those teachers need to be trained, retrained, certified, and have background and mental health checks regularly."

Other students gave their own suggestions for providing access to firearms in schools. For example:

> Instead of openly having firearms which may scare certain kids and cause an outcry, have a metal safe somewhere visible in the classroom that every student is aware has [a] gun in it. When the safe [is] opened it triggers a warning to the office just in case a teacher were to open it between classes or at the start of school when no kids are around. This way staff would be notified of when the safe is open and could send security so [sic] stop the teacher who opened the safe if it wasn't in a dire situation. The safes should only allow a single handgun and only licensed teachers should be allowed to have them, they should not be opened unless during a serious lockdown. This would make students feel much safe [sic] in a real school shooting scenario."

Some students indicated that it was hard for them to know whether arming teachers is a good idea since many of the details for how it would be implemented are unknown. Students indicated that they would want to know how the teachers would be trained, how the school would prevent theft of the weapon, or what precautions would be in place to ensure that the weapon would not be used unnecessarily.

Recommendations

Consistent with previous reports,[20] students in our survey rated their schools as generally safe. However, they had specific concerns about the safety of their schools and diverse opinions and suggestions about how to improve safety and overall school climate. Their responses suggest the following recommendations:

1 **Federal and state funding should be provided to promote the availability and improve the access and quality of school mental health services.**

Although persons with mental illness are not more likely to commit violence, mental health services were the most frequently requested safety measure. Students cited that additional mental health services were necessary to improve school climate and more generally to improve student wellbeing. The student responses are consistent with other research finding that providing school-based mental health services is associated with lower suspension and expulsion rates as well as fewer disciplinary incidents.[21] Students were aware that services existed but felt that the services were insufficient, either due to limited provider availability or lack of provider training.

Given that the pandemic may have a negative impact on mental health, students may be returning to school with additional mental health needs[22] above and beyond what was needed in the past, making it even more important for there to be increased access to high-quality school-based mental health services.

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

Students' responses demonstrated a wide variety of perspectives on school safety measures. While some students identified additional safety measures, others believed there were already too many safety measures implemented and some needed to be discontinued. Such a range suggests that policymakers should gather and use student input to help evaluate particular options to better support a safe learning environment for all students.

Appendix

To ensure that the responses were consistently categorized, we implemented a multistep validation process. First, the 1,984 open-ended responses were randomly assigned to one of the three authors of this report. Each author read all assigned comments and created an outline of topics with words and key phrases used to describe the topics. Second, the authors reviewed all three outlines, documenting similarities and differences, then modifying and combining them into one. Third, the combined outline was used to create categories and subcategories using Qualtrics Text iQ; one author manually created the categories by typing into the system the terms and words specified in the outline. Fourth, a random sample of open-ended responses (n=300) and their categorizations were selected for review by two of the three authors. Responses were flagged when a reviewer believed that a response option was misaligned with the category. Each flagged response was discussed by the three authors. This process occurred three times and stopped when less than 10% of the reviewed responses, across the two reviewing authors, were flagged. A total of 1,829 (92%) responses were categorized. Uncategorized responses were ones that did not relate to the survey topic (e.g., students asking when their test scores would be received, informing us that they missed their test, or telling us they did not test at their school).

Table A1 summarizes the final outline of categories and subcategories. Included in the table is a definition for each category. All categories except for mixed feelings of safety and examples of specific safety incidents were coded using search terms via Text iQ; the two aforementioned categories were categorized by reading the responses and manually coding each of them in the appropriate category because the topics were so complex that searching on a word or phrase was not sufficient.

Table A1. Physical Safety Text Analysis Categories & Subcategories

Category	Definition
Evaluation of School Safety	**This category focuses on two aspects of school safety: (a) identification of what the school is doing to make students feel safe should an emergency happen and (b) determination of whether school staff are doing enough to make students feel safe**
School effort	Student responses indicating how well they thought the school was doing in keeping students safe
Generic school safety	Student responses that simply stated that their school was safe, without any additional explanation
Emergency preparation	Student responses that described what the school was doing, if anything at all, to make students feel safe in case of an emergency
Start Doing	**Safety measures that students believe should be implemented (or added) at their school**
Mental health resources	Students referenced needing mental health resources, including specific services like therapy and staff who are trained to provide mental health support, like school counselors
Security staff	Students suggested new, better, or more security staff in their school
Secure doors	Students referenced the need for locking the school building doors
Rules or laws	Students discussed the need for rules, policies, or laws associated with gun regulation or school safety in general
Safety drills	Students highlighted the importance of having safety drills, including the need to have more of them and to have drills that highlight how to respond to a school shooting
Security cameras	Students requested the need for security cameras if they aren't already present or requested more cameras if they are
Metal detectors	Students requested metal detectors in their school
Self-defense classes	Students requested classes that would help them in self-defense
Additional suggestions	Additional suggestions varied but ranged from the need to support homeless students to repairing the physical structure of the school building
Bag checks	Students requested bags be checked or see-through bags to decrease the chances that a weapon would be brought into the school
Student IDs	Requests for students' IDs, including requiring the use of these IDs to get into the school
Disciplinary actions	Students requested that there be stronger disciplinary action given to students who disobeyed school policies
Stop Doing/Less Of	**Students offered recommendations to remove some safety measures from their school, as too much security made their school feel like a "prison and distracted their learning"**

Category	Definition
Resource officer	Students wanted fewer security officers, either because there were too many in their school or they were not helpful
Security cameras	Students wanted fewer security cameras, as they did not want to be constantly watched or did not think the cameras did anything to increase safety
Other	Suggestions that did not fit in either category
Feelings of Safety	**How students explicitly discussed their feelings of safety in and around their school**
Feel safe	Students indicated that they felt safe at their school
Mixed	Students felt safe but also indicated that there were times when they felt unsafe
Unsafe	Students indicated that they felt unsafe at school
Teachers & Firearms	**Students specifically discussed their opinion on whether or not their teachers should be armed**
Teachers should not be trained	Students discussed not wanting teachers or administrators to have firearms or be trained to carry firearms
Teachers should be trained	Students indicated they were in favor of training teachers/educators to carry firearms
Other comments on training teachers	Students either articulated the pros and cons of training educators, presented an alternative to educators carrying firearms, or requested more details for how the policy would be enacted
Security Staff	**Students discussed how security staff influence their feelings of safety at their school**
Quality of staff	Students want better-quality resource/security officers in contrast to simply adding more officers in their school. For example, some mentioned that some of their security officers were old and seemingly unhelpful in the event of an emergency, so they would rather have more helpful security.
Want or need more	Students mentioned not having enough security guards at their school (based on the size of the school or just feelings of safety) and wanted more
Specific Safety Incidents	**Students reported specific safety incidents, such as reports of a bomb threat or potential active shooter, at their school**
Anxiety and Worry	**Students described feeling worried, anxious, or nervous while at school**
Bullying	**Students mentioned that bullying was a major problem at their school and discussed how this influenced their feelings of safety. Students mentioned specific incidents of marginalized groups/minorities, racism, discussions of the Confederate flag at their school, or other "ism"s (sexism, etc.).**

Note: Major categories are shaded and in bold.

Notes

1. Linda Darling-Hammond, Lisa Flook, Channa Cook-Harvey, Brigid Barron, and David Osher, "Implications for Educational Practice of the Science of Learning and Development," *Applied Developmental Science* 24, no. 2 (February 2019). doi: 10.1080/10888691.2018.1537791; Federal Commission on School Safety, *Final Report on the Federal Commission on School Safety* (Washington, DC: The US Departments of Education, Justice, Homeland Security, and Health and Human Services, 2018), https://www2.ed.gov/documents/school-safety/school-safety-report.pdf.

2. Safe and Sound Schools, *State of School Safety Report 2019* (Newtown, CT: Safe and Sound Schools, 2019), https://www.safeandsoundschools.org/resources/state-of-school-safety-reports/.

3. The response rate for the survey was approximately 17%, with a total of 16,000 students participating. Of the survey participants, 12% provided a response to the open-ended question.

4. Michelle Croft, Raeal Moore, and Gretchen Guffy, *Creating Safe Schools: Examining Student Perceptions of Their Physical Safety at School* (Iowa City, IA: ACT, 2019), https://www.act.org/content/dam/act/unsecured/documents/R1767-school-safety-brief.pdf.

5. Throughout this report we provide the percentage of responses in a specific category. Because some responses were placed in more than one category, groups of percentages in a given context often do not add up to 100%.

6. Students were asked to what extent they agreed or disagreed with the statement "I feel safe at my school." These results are also presented in Croft, Moore, and Guffy, *Creating Safe Schools*.

7. Harvard Health Publishing, "Mental Illness and Violence," (*Harvard Mental Health Letter*, January 2011), https://www.health.harvard.edu/newsletter_article/mental-illness-and-violence.

8. Michelle Croft, Shannon Hayes, and Raeal Moore, Supporting the Mental Health Well-Being of High School Students (Iowa City, IA: ACT, 2019), https://www.act.org/content/dam/act/unsecured/documents/R1798-mental-health-2020-01.pdf.

9. Jeffrey W. Swanson, E. Elizabeth McGinty, Seena Fazel, and Vickie M. Mays, "Mental Illness and Reduction of Gun Violence and Suicide: Bringing Epidemiologic Research to Policy, *Annals of Epidemiology* 25, no. 5 (May 2015), 366-376, doi: 10.1016/j.annepidem.2014.03.004; Amy Swearer, "The Role of Mental Illness in Mass Shootings, Suicides," The Heritage Foundation, 12 February, 2019, https://www.heritage.org/public-health/commentary/the-role-mental-illness-mass-shootings-suicides; Rhitu Chatterjee, "School Shooters: What's Their Path to Violence?," *NPR's All Things Considered*, 10 February, 2019, https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2019/02/10/690372199/school-shooters-whats-their-path-to-violence; Allison Paolini, School Shootings and Student Mental Health: Role of the School Counselor in Mitigating Violence, (Alexandria, VA: VISTAS

Online, 2015), https://www.counseling.org/docs/default-source/vistas/school-shootings-and-student-mental-health.pdf; Katherine C. Cowan, "Advocacy Regarding School Safety and Mental Health," *Communique* 48, no. 4 (December 2019).

10. Amir Whitaker, Sylvia Torres-Guillén, Michelle Morton, Harold Jordan, Stefanie Coyle, Angela Mann, and Wei-Ling Sun, Cops and No Counselors: How the Lack of School Mental Health Staff is Harming Students (American Civil Liberties Union, 2019).

11. National Center for Education Statistics, "Policies Outlining the Role of Sworn Law Enforcement Officers in Public Schools," Data Point NCES 2020-027 (2020), https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2020/2020027.pdf.

12. National Center for Education Statistics, "Policies Outlining the Role of Sworn Law Enforcement Officers in Public Schools."

13. Jason P. Nance, "Students, Police, and the School-to-Prison Pipeline," *Washington Law Review* 93 (2016), 919–987, https://scholarship.law.ufl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1782&context=facultypub; Evie Blad and Alex Harwin, "Black Students More Likely to Be Arrested at School," *Education Week*, January 24, 2017, https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2017/01/25/black-students-more-likely-to-be-arrested.html.

14. National Center for Education Statistics, "Policies Outlining the Role of Sworn Law Enforcement Officers in Public Schools."

15. National Association of School Resource Officers, "Frequently Asked Questions," NASRO, https://www.nasro.org/faq/.

16. Ryan Faircloth, "Minneapolis Public Schools Terminate Contract with Police Department over George Floyd's Death," *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, June 2 (2020), https://www.startribune.com/mpls-school-board-ends-contract-with-police-for-school-resource-officers/570967942/.

17. We investigated whether there was a relationship between school security and school climate depending on various student and school characteristics. Generally, there was no relationship between climate and the presence or absence of school security, except for school location. The race/ethnicity of the student and whether the school had a security officer was not statistically related to school climate.

18. Students' responses regarding training educators to carry a weapon were not included in Figure 2.

19. These percentages do not add to 100% because some students were included in more than one category. For example, one student indicated that they would consider training educators to carry firearms if certain stipulations were in place. This student was categorized as both supporting the measure and providing pros/cons to the measure.

20. Croft, Moore, and Guffy, *Creating Safe Schools*; Safe and Sound Schools, *State of School Safety Report 2019*.

21. Amir Whitaker, Sylvia Torres-Guillén, Michelle Morton, Harold Jordan, Stefanie Coyle, Angela Mann, and Wei-Ling Sun, Cops and No Counselors: How the Lack of School Mental Health Staff is Harming Students (American Civil Liberties Union, 2019).

22. Michelle Croft, Raeal Moore, Gretchen Guffy, Shannon Hayes, Katie Gragnaniello, and Dan Vitale, *High School Students' Experiences During the First Month of the Coronavirus Pandemic* (Iowa City, IA: ACT, 2020), https://www.act.org/content/dam/act/unsecured/documents/R1841-covid-insights-2020-08.pdf.

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