

School shooters don't simply "snap." The circumstances that lead to violence are complex and far ranging, often the culmination of months and years of individual experiences. Accordingly, improving school safety cannot focus solely on mitigating incidents of violence. Successful efforts must improve the culture in which students live and learn. This includes developing students of strong character who are connected in meaningful ways to their peers, educators, and communities.

CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT AND A CULTURE OF CONNECTEDNESS

Research suggests that social emotional learning (SEL) builds the skills that allow youth to put into practice the knowledge they receive through character education.

Social media can help students access information, connect with family and friends, and provide a means of communication for those who feel isolated or disconnected in the offline world. However, social media can also provide a platform for unfortunate interactions with others, such as cyberbullying. Educators are equally aware that some online conduct, although perceived as bullying, may be protected by the First Amendment.

CYBERBULLYING AND SCHOOL SAFETY

In recent surveys, 34 percent of youth reported being cyberbullied in their lifetime, and bullying has been cited as a contributing factor in cases of extreme retaliation, including school shootings.

Although the presence of a mental illness may not be directly correlated to violence, trends with respect to youth mental illness are of great concern. Rates of youth depression, anxiety, self-harm, and most tragically, suicide are climbing. Approximately one in 10 children and youth in the United States experience a serious emotional disturbance (SED), yet only 20 percent of them receive the help they need.

CURATING A HEALTHIER AND SAFER APPROACH: ISSUES OF MENTAL HEALTH AND COUNSELING FOR OUR YOUNG

The reasons for this include failure to recognize problems, fear of negative attitudes and discrimination, and lack of resources.

Students often come to school with multiple complex health, mental health, and social service needs. Schools can play an important role in curating healthy environments that seek to prevent and mitigate the onset of health and mental health conditions. Developing and promoting models in which mental health and substance use screening, treatment, and support services are integrated into school and pediatric settings can help to ensure that children, youth, and adolescents with needs (along with their families) are identified earlier and gain access to treatment and other support services.

INTEGRATING MENTAL HEALTH, PRIMARY CARE, FAMILY SERVICES, AND COURT-ORDERED TREATMENT

Prevention services that address mental health conditions and divert youth from the juvenile justice system are an essential part of an effective continuum of services.

Informed, alert communities play a critical role in keeping our nation safe. By reporting suspicious activities, individuals may be providing the information authorities need to stop an attack before it occurs. This is especially true in relation to school attacks. Studies have shown that, prior to the incident, most attackers engaged in behavior that caused others concern and that others knew about the attacker's ideas or plan to attack.

USING SUSPICIOUS ACTIVITY REPORTING AND THREAT ASSESSMENTS TO ENHANCE SCHOOL SAFETY

As early as the Columbine Commission Report, experts have recognized the importance of providing a mechanism for anonymous reporting.

Press coverage of school shootings is often sensational, which can exacerbate the trauma of those directly and indirectly affected and potentially incite successive events. Wall-to-wall cable television coverage, front-page images, and overloaded social media feeds make it nearly inevitable that most people will learn about what transpired, including the names, faces, and personal stories of those who perpetrated the acts of violence.

EFFECTS OF PRESS COVERAGE OF MASS SHOOTINGS

Reports indicate that the alleged Parkland shooter received letters of encouragement, greeting cards, and even money in prison. The letters are often written by regular, everyday teenage girls from across the nation.

Children have 24/7 access to multiple forms of entertainment at their fingertips. Their exposure to violent entertainment is of particular concern—in television, video games, social media, music, movies, graphic novels, and books. Violent content is ubiquitous across these platforms and continues to grow.

VIOLENT ENTERTAINMENT AND RATING SYSTEMS

One correlational study found that children who view more violent programs spend less time interacting with other children, which could be an indicator for social isolation.

Teachers are often best positioned to identify and address disorderly conduct at school. They have an understanding of the students entrusted to their care and can see behavioral patterns on an ongoing basis. In partnership with principals and other school leaders, teachers can help correct—and where necessary, discipline—those behaviors that are unwelcome or unsafe for the school community. Maintaining order in schools is a key to keeping schools safe.

THE OBAMA ADMINISTRATION’S “RETHINK SCHOOL DISCIPLINE” GUIDANCE

Research clearly indicates that the failure of schools to appropriately discipline disruptive students has consequences for overall student achievement.

Every youth who appears to be “troubled” or displays “troubled” behavior has a unique set of risk and protective factors contributing to his or her behaviors. Risk factors can include mental health symptoms such as mood problems, impulsivity, anxiety, hallucinations, or other psychotic symptoms. They can also include environmental factors such as history of trauma, adverse events, poor supervision, and inappropriate coping behaviors.

THE EFFECTIVENESS AND APPROPRIATENESS OF PSYCHOTROPIC MEDICATION FOR TREATMENT OF TROUBLED YOUTH

Nationally, there is only about one practicing child and adolescent psychiatrist for every 1,800 youth in need of their special expertise. This imbalance is expected to grow in coming decades.

This section provides an overview of federal and state laws that place age-related restrictions on the possession and purchase of firearms. Existing research does not demonstrate that laws imposing a minimum age for firearms purchases have a measurable impact on reducing homicides, suicides, or unintentional deaths.

THE EFFICACY OF AGE RESTRICTIONS FOR FIREARM PURCHASES

Analyses of completed school shootings indicate that school shooters do not frequently use legal purchase as a method for obtaining firearms. More often, they obtain them from within the home or steal them.

Too often following a mass shooting we learn that people who knew the shooter saw warning signs of potential violence but felt powerless to do anything. If the person has not yet broken any law and may not meet the mental health standards for involuntary commitment, what can be done? A number of states have attempted to answer this question, at least in part, through “extreme risk protection order” (ERPO) laws.

EXTREME RISK PROTECTION ORDER LAWS

ERPO laws are of relatively recent vintage. There is little research on effectiveness. A recent study found that Indiana’s law was associated with a 7.5 percent decrease in firearm suicides in the first 10 years.

The FBI receives thousands of calls a day from the public through its Public Access Line (PAL), a unit operating within its Criminal Justice Information Services (CJIS) Division. PAL serves as a central intake point for tip information from the public about potential or ongoing crimes.

IMPROVEMENTS TO THE FBI'S PUBLIC ACCESS LINE

PAL is undergoing a transformation to become a full-fledged Operations Center. This change will provide PAL with greater capabilities to processing and taking action on information provided by the public.