

## ***School Safety: A Focus on Prevention***

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**Dewey G. Cornell, Ph. D.**

- Professor of Education in the Curry School of Education at the University of Virginia.
- Director of the UVA Youth Violence Project and faculty associate of the Institute of Law, Psychiatry, and Public Policy.
- Trained as forensic clinical psychologist, worked with hundreds of violent offenders
- Studied youth violence for 30+ years, 200+ publications in psychology and education
- Developed threat assessment guidelines for schools in 2001.

## **Main Points**

1. Decisions about school safety must be based on facts, not fear.
2. School violence is a small part of a larger problem of gun violence; schools are safer than almost any other place.
3. We need more emphasis on prevention.
4. Threat assessment is a useful tool to identify students in need of assistance.

## **Traumatic Effect of School Shootings**



School shootings are so traumatic that they convince everyone that we extensive schools are unsafe and require extensive security measures.

## **Shooting at Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida**



We need both recovery from trauma and a factual analysis of the best way to prevent more shootings.



**GUN VIOLENCE:**  
PREDICTION, PREVENTION, AND POLICY  
APA PANEL OF EXPERTS REPORT  
American Psychological Association  
Washington, DC

**Annual Gun Toll**  
- 33,000 deaths  
- 67,000 injuries  
100,000 total

**275**  
Shootings per day

APA report is available at <http://www.apa.org/pubs/info/reports/gun-violence-prevention.aspx>  
Shooting deaths from: National Vital Statistics  
[http://webappa.cdc.gov/sasweb/ncipc/dataRestriction\\_inj.html](http://webappa.cdc.gov/sasweb/ncipc/dataRestriction_inj.html)  
Shooting injuries from: <http://webappa.cdc.gov/sasweb/ncipc/nfirates2001.html>

A photograph of a police car at night with a 'POLICE LINE DO NOT CROSS' sign in the foreground. The American Psychological Association logo is at the bottom left.

301 School Shootings In America Since 2013

MAPS | GUNS IN PUBLIC PLACES

5 yrs x 100,000 =  
**500,000**  
outside of schools

A map of the United States with small white dots representing school shootings. A large black text box is overlaid on the map, containing the text '5 yrs x 100,000 = 500,000 outside of schools'. The map is titled '301 School Shootings In America Since 2013' and includes a legend for 'MAPS' and 'GUNS IN PUBLIC PLACES'. Below the map is a timeline from 2013 to 2018.

301 School Shootings In America Since 2013

MAPS | GUNS IN PUBLIC PLACES

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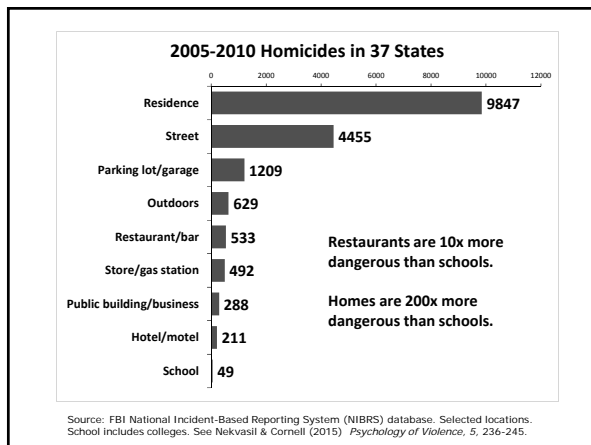
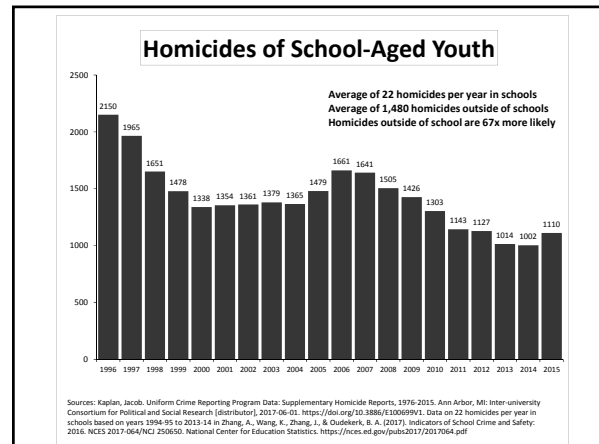
The real problem is  
*gun* violence,  
not *school* violence.

A map of the United States with small white dots representing school shootings. A large black text box is overlaid on the map, containing the text 'The real problem is gun violence, not school violence.'. The map is titled '301 School Shootings In America Since 2013' and includes a legend for 'MAPS' and 'GUNS IN PUBLIC PLACES'. Below the map is a timeline from 2013 to 2018.

## March for Our Lives




**Youth from across the country emphasize the gun violence they experienced both in and out of school.**



### What Can Be Done About School Shootings? A Review of the Evidence

Randy Borum, Dewey G. Cornell, William Modzeleski, and Shane R. Jimerson

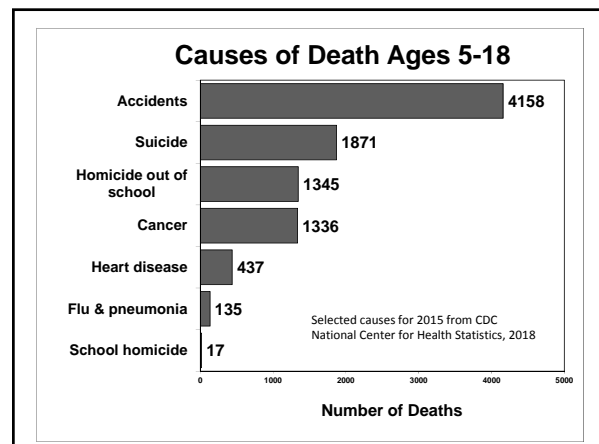


**“Any given school can expect to experience a student homicide about once every 6,000 years.”**

125,000 schools ÷ 21 deaths/year


2010 *Educational Researcher*, Vol. 39, pp. 27-37

**When was the last time a student was murdered at one of Virginia’s K-12 public schools?**

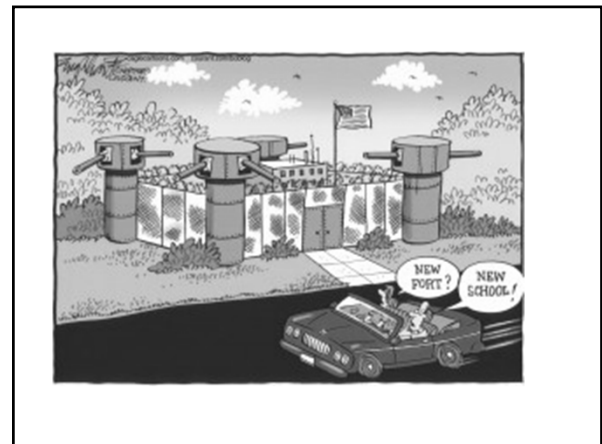


### Why the Fear of School Violence Matters

**Newtown Rampage Spurs \$5 Billion School Security Spending**



<http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2013-11-14/schools-boosting-security-spending-after-newtown-massacre>



### Building Security Measures



**Bullet-Proof Building Entrances**

### Building Security Measures



**Metal detectors and x-ray screening**

Extra security in Hillsborough schools would cost \$4 million

**School security measures could cost millions locally**

**Additional Florida School Security Could Cost \$100 Million**

School security wish list would cost Marion County \$160M

Armed guards in every Minn. school would cost \$138 million

NRA proposal would cost state schools about \$138 million.

(DeAngelis, Brent, & Ianni, 2011)

Extra security in Hillsborough schools would cost \$4 million

**School security measures are expensive and deprive schools of resources that could be allocated to preventive measures such as anti-bullying programs and counseling services.**

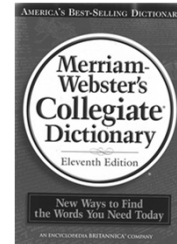
Armed guards in every Minn. school would cost \$138 million

NRA proposal would cost state schools about \$138 million.

*Every Per Pupil dollar spent for Security is a Per Pupil dollar NOT spent for Instruction.*

**We should prevent shootings rather than simply prepare for them.**

**Prevention means  
“to keep something from happening”**



**Crisis response is not prevention.**



A crisis occurs when prevention has failed.

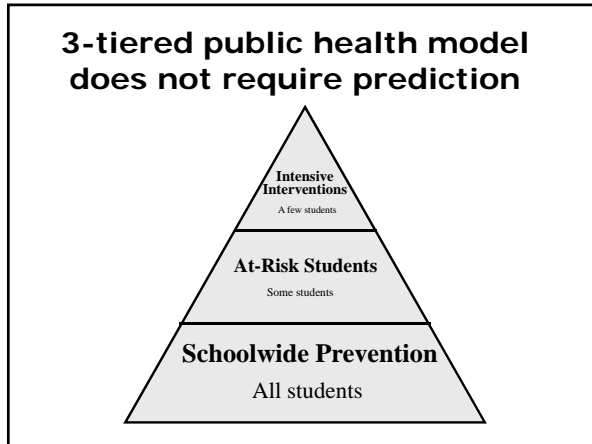
Photo of Virginia Tech shooter pointing gun

**Prevention must start before the gunman is at your door.**



**Critics say,  
“We can’t *predict* who will be violent,  
so prevention is not possible.”**

**However,....**



### Prevention does not require prediction.

We cannot predict who will have an accident, but safety regulations make safer roads, cars, and drivers.

**Universal, primary, or tier 1 prevention**

### Prevention can reduce risk factors.

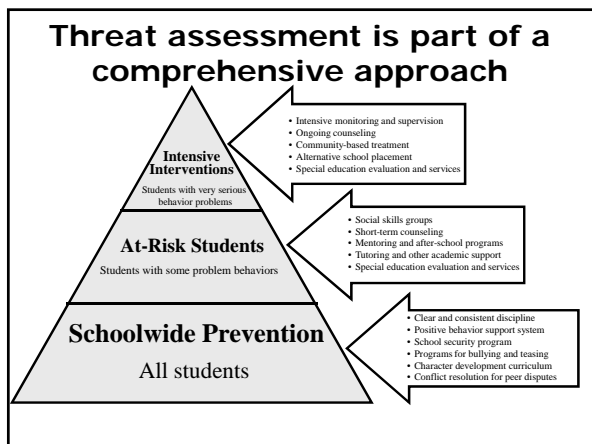
We cannot predict who will get cancer, but we can identify risk and protective factors that reduce cancer rates dramatically.

**Selected, secondary, or tier 2 prevention**

### Prevention can resolve a crisis.

We can intervene to resolve crisis situations before they deteriorate into violence.


**Intensive, tertiary, or tier 3 prevention**



### FBI Recommendations on School Violence

“Although the risk of an actual shooting incident at any one school is very low, threats of violence are potentially a problem at any school. Once a threat is made, having a fair, rational, and standardized method of evaluating and responding to threats is critically important.” (FBI report p 1)

Download at [www.fbi.gov](http://www.fbi.gov)



**Secret Service/DOE Recommendations:**

- Create a planning team to develop a threat assessment program.
- Identify roles for school personnel.
- Clarify role of law enforcement.
- Conduct threat assessments of students who make threats of violence.

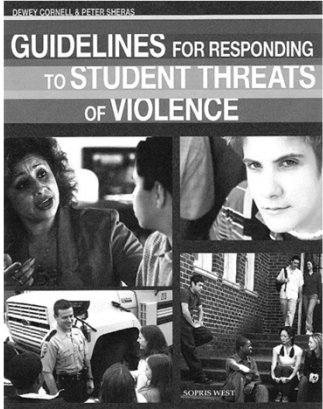
Download at:  
[www.secretservice.gov](http://www.secretservice.gov)

## What is Threat Assessment?

**Threat assessment is a problem-solving approach to violence prevention that involves assessment and intervention with students who have threatened violence in some way.**

## Threat Assessment

1. *Identification* of threats made by students.
2. *Evaluation* of seriousness of threat and danger it poses to others, recognizing that all threats are not the same (e.g., toy guns are not dangerous).
3. *Intervention* to reduce risk of violence.
4. *Follow-up* to assess intervention results.




- How could threat assessment be applied in schools?
- What special issues and concerns must be considered?
- How would threat assessments be conducted with students?

### Accurate Threat Assessment Avoids 2 Errors ...


#### 1. Over-reaction

School Suspends Second Grader for Eating His Pop-Tart Into the Shape of a Gun




### Accurate Threat Assessment Avoids 2 Errors ...





#### 2. Under-Reaction



## Continuum of Threats



- Warning of impending violence
- Attempts to intimidate or frighten
- Thrill of causing a disruption
- Attention-seeking, boasting
- Fleeting expressions of anger
- Jokes
- Figures of speech

### As schools cope with safety threats since Fla. shooting, parents and leaders try to balance concern with calm




2017 members prepare to enter Cumberland High School while the school was under lockdown in Dumont, N.J., on Feb. 20, 2015. A high school student was taken into custody after a reported social-media threat that prompted the lockdown and a SWAT team response. (AP Photo/The Record)

### As schools cope with safety threats since Fla. shooting, parents and leaders try to balance concern with calm




- Copy cat hoaxes
- Attention-seeking
- Students in crisis




**Key Point**

*Threat assessment is not designed to determine whether a student has **MADE** a threat, but whether a student **POSES** a threat.*




**Key Point**


*In a threat assessment, we try to determine **why** a student made a threat, and therefore how we can **prevent** the threat from being carried out.*




**Key Point**

*Students **DO NOT** have to be suspended for making a threatening statement.*

*Many threats can be resolved without suspension.*





## Research on Threat Assessment

1. Cornell, D., Sheras, P., Kaplan, S., McConville, D., Douglass, J., Elkon, A., McKnight, L., Branson, C., & Cole, J. (2004). Guidelines for student threat assessment: Field-test findings. *School Psychology Review, 33*, 527-546.
2. Kaplan, S., & Cornell, D. (2005). Threats of violence by students in special education. *Behavioral Disorders, 31*, 107-119.
3. Strong, K., & Cornell, D. (2008). Student threat assessment in Memphis City Schools: A descriptive report. *Behavioral Disorders, 34*, 42-54.
4. Allen, K., Cornell, D., Lorek, E., & Sheras, P. (2008). Response of school personnel to student threat assessment training. *School Effectiveness and School Improvement, 19*, 319-332.
5. Cornell, D., Sheras, P., Gregory, A., & Fan, X. (2009). A retrospective study of school safety conditions in high schools using the Virginia Threat Assessment Guidelines versus alternative approaches. *School Psychology Quarterly, 24*, 119-129.
6. Cornell, D., Gregory, A., & Fan, X. (2011). Reductions in long-term suspensions following adoption of the Virginia Student Threat Assessment Guidelines. *Bulletin of the National Association of Secondary School Principals, 95*, 175-194.
7. Cornell, D., Allen, K., & Fan, X. (2012). A randomized controlled study of the Virginia Student Threat Assessment Guidelines in grades K-12. *School Psychology Review, 41*, 100-115.
8. Cornell, D. & Lovegrove, P. (2015). Student threat assessment as a method for reducing student suspensions. In D. Losen (Ed.), *Closing the School Discipline Gap: Research for Policymakers*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
9. Nekvasil, E., Cornell, D. (2015). Student threat assessment associated with positive school climate in middle schools. *Journal of Threat Assessment and Management 2*, 98-113. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/tam0000038>



## Research on Threat Assessment

1. 99% of threats not carried out.
2. Only 1% expelled, 1% arrested.
3. Suspension rates decreased.
4. Racial disparities reduced or absent.
5. Counseling used more often.
6. More positive school climate.

## Virginia mandates K-12 threat assessment in 2013

Code of Virginia  
Title 22.1 Education  
Chapter 7. General Powers and Duties of School Boards


**§ 22.1-79.4. Threat assessment teams and oversight committees**

A. Each local school board shall adopt policies for the establishment of threat assessment teams, including the assessment of and intervention with students whose behavior may pose a threat to the safety of school staff or students consistent with the model policies developed by the Virginia Center for School and Campus Safety in accordance with § 22.1-715. Such policies shall include procedures for referrals to community services funds or health care providers for evaluation or treatment, when appropriate.


B. The superintendent of each school division may establish a committee charged with oversight of the threat assessment teams operating within the division, which may be an existing committee established by the division. The committee shall include individuals with expertise in human resources, education, school administration, mental health, and law enforcement.

C. Each school division superintendent shall establish, for each school, a threat assessment team that shall include persons with expertise in counseling, intervention, school administration, and law enforcement. Threat assessment teams may be established to serve one or more schools as determined by the division superintendent. Each team shall (i) provide guidance to students, faculty, and staff regarding recognition of threatening or abusive behavior that may represent a threat to the community, school, or self; (ii) identify members of the school community to whom threatening behavior should be reported; and (iii) implement policies adopted by the local school board pursuant to subsection A.






**Department of Justice**  
Office of Justice Programs



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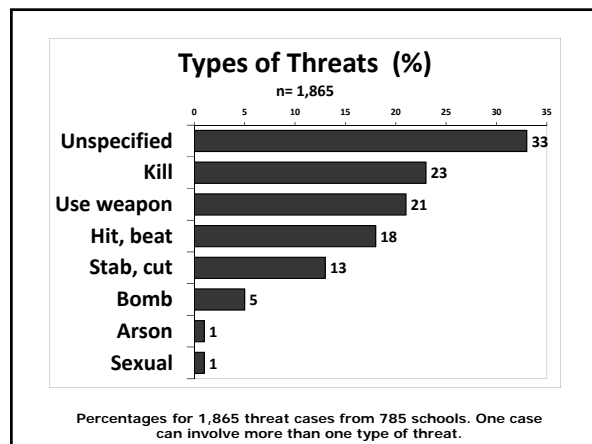
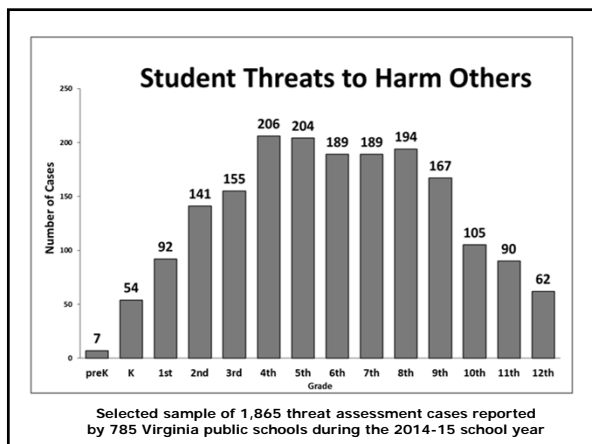
**DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE ANNOUNCES \$63 MILLION TO SUPPORT SCHOOL SAFETY RESEARCH AND REDUCE GUN VIOLENCE**

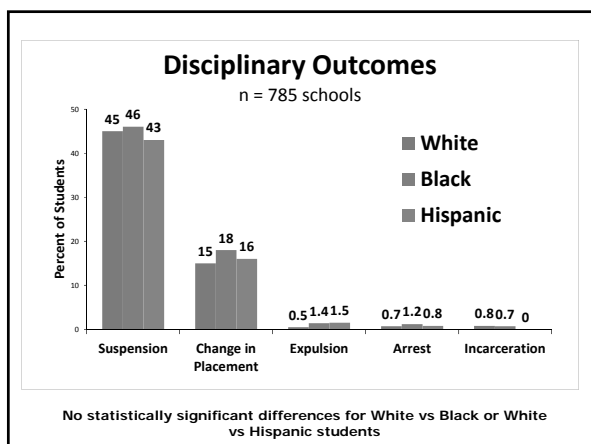
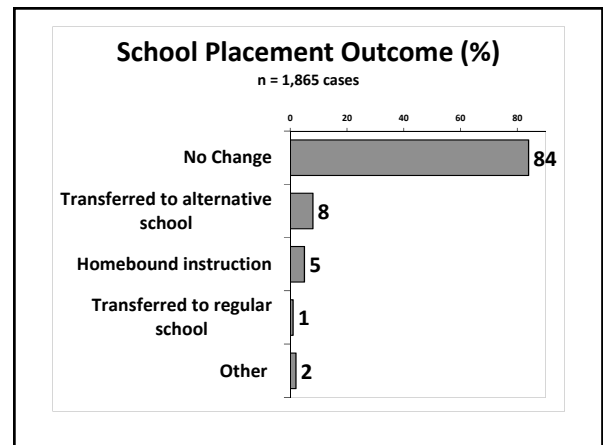
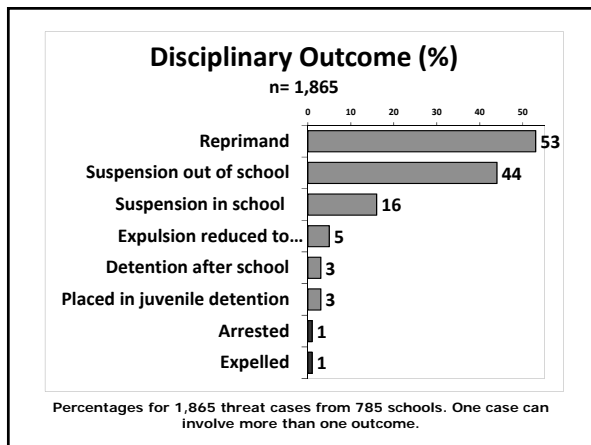
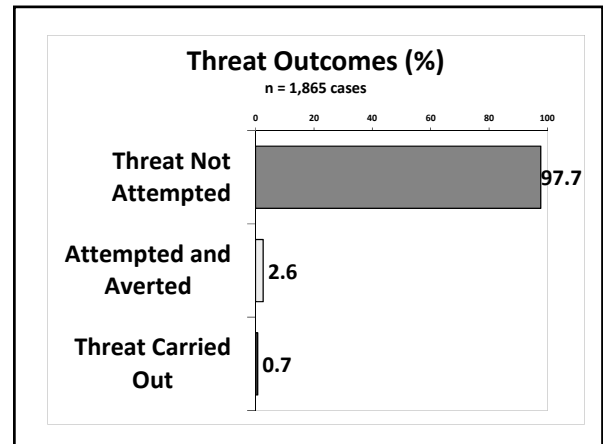
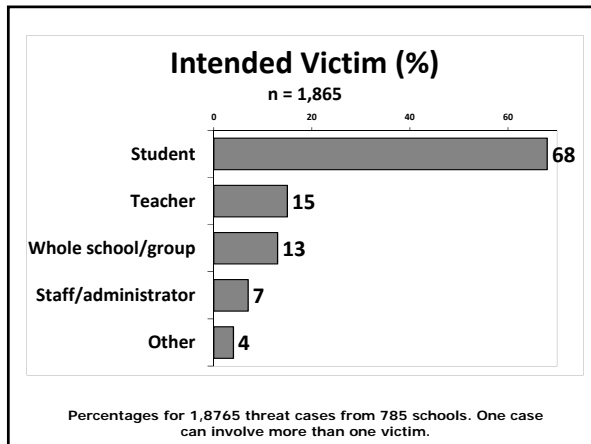


**Student Threat Assessment as a Safe and Supportive Prevention Strategy**

4-year project (2015-2018)

This project supported by Grant #NIJ 2014-CK-BX-0004 awarded by the National Institute of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice. The opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this publication/program/exhibition are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department of Justice.





### Virginia School Threat Assessment: Positive Findings

- Analyses show some positive results for statewide implementation of student threat assessment.
- Schools are making differentiated assessments, recognizing that most cases are not serious.
- Most students are able to return to school, with few arrests or expulsions.
- Similar outcomes for Black, Hispanic, and White students.

### Virginia School Threat Assessment: Challenges

- Many schools not conducting threat assessments
- Many team members need training
- Many teachers and other staff not aware of their school team
- Students and parents not aware of threat assessment:
  - Report serious threats
  - Caution not to make threats

### School Safety Online Educational Program

- **Students** (15 min)
- **Parents** (25 min)
- **Teachers/staff** (25 min)
- **Team members** (25, 20, 30 min)

Programs include anonymous survey questions to measure learning. Answers will be used for research purposes. For more information, contact Dr. Jennifer Maeng at [jl7c7d@virginia.edu](mailto:jl7c7d@virginia.edu)

### Threat Assessment Online Educational Program for Teachers

To preview the 25 minute program:  
<http://www.schoolthreatassessment.com/>  
 Preview code: vtjsx

Do not share or disseminate this code. To use this program or other programs for students, parents, and team members, contact Dr. Jennifer Maeng at [jl7c7d@virginia.edu](mailto:jl7c7d@virginia.edu)

### Call for Action to Prevent Gun Violence in the United States of America

Interdisciplinary Group on Preventing School and Community Violence

**Endorsed by 200+ organizations and 2,000+ individuals**

- American Federation of Teachers
- American Psychological Association
- Council for Children with Behavioral Disorders
- National Educational Association
- National PTA
- National Association of Social Workers

**To read and sign**  
<https://curry.virginia.edu/prevent-gun-violence>

### Call for Action to Prevent Gun Violence in the United States of America

Interdisciplinary Group on Preventing School and Community Violence  
 February 20, 2018

School shootings and widespread community gun violence are far greater in the United States than other nations. America cannot be great and realize its promise of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness if our children are not safe from gun violence.

Although security measures are important, a focus on simply preparing for shootings is insufficient. We need a change in mindset and policy from reaction to prevention. Prevention entails more than security measures and begins long before a gunman comes to school. We need a comprehensive public health approach to gun violence that is informed by scientific evidence and free from partisan politics.

A public health approach to protecting children as well as adults from gun violence involves three levels of prevention: (1) universal approaches promoting safety and well-being for everyone; (2) practices for reducing risk and promoting protective factors for persons experiencing difficulties; and (3) interventions for individuals where violence is present or appears imminent.

### Eight-Point Plan to Prevent Gun Violence

**1<sup>st</sup> Level**

1. A national requirement for all schools to assess school climate and maintain physically and emotionally safe conditions and positive school environments that protect all students and adults from bullying, discrimination, harassment, and assault;
2. A ban on assault-style weapons, high-capacity ammunition clips, and products that modify semi-automatic firearms to enable them to function like automatic firearms.

**2<sup>nd</sup> Level**

3. Adequate staffing (such as counselors, psychiatrists, psychologists, and social workers) of coordinated school- and community-based mental health services for individuals with risk factors for violence, recognizing that violence is not intrinsically a product of mental illness;
4. Reform of school discipline to reduce exclusionary practices and foster positive social, behavioral, emotional, and academic success for students;
5. Universal background checks to screen out violent offenders, persons who have been hospitalized for violence towards self or others, and persons on no-fly, terrorist watch lists.

**Eight-Point Plan to Prevent Gun Violence**

**3<sup>rd</sup> Level**

6. A national program to train and maintain school- and community-based threat assessment teams that include mental health and law enforcement partners. Threat assessment programs should include practical channels of communication for persons to report potential threats as well as interventions to resolve conflicts and assist troubled individuals;

7. Removal of legal barriers to sharing safety-related information among educational, mental health, and law enforcement agencies in cases where a person has threatened violence;

8. Laws establishing Gun Violence Protection Orders that allow courts to issue time-limited restraining orders requiring that firearms be recovered by law enforcement when there is evidence that an individual is planning to carry out acts against others or against themselves.

**Eight-Point Plan to Prevent Gun Violence**

Congress and the executive branch must remove barriers to gun violence research and institute a program of scientific research on gun violence that encompasses all levels of prevention. We contend that well-executed laws can reduce gun violence while protecting all Constitutional rights.

It's time for federal and state authorities to take immediate action to enact these proposals and provide adequate resources for effective implementation. We call on law enforcement, mental health, and educational agencies to begin actions supporting these prevention efforts. We ask all parents and youth to join efforts advocating for these changes, and we urge voters to elect representatives who will take effective action to prevent gun violence in our nation.

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## Concluding Points

1. **School violence is a small part of a larger problem of gun violence**
2. **Schools are much safer than the public thinks. We need to balance security with prevention efforts.**
3. **Threat assessment can help schools respond to student threats.**

<http://youthviolence.edschool.virginia.edu>

**YOUTH VIOLENCE PROJECT**

The Virginia Youth Violence Project is a research group composed of faculty and graduate students in the Curry School of Education at the University of Virginia. We conduct research on youth violence prevention and school safety, and provide training and consultation on topics such as threat assessment, bullying prevention, and forensic psychology.

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**PREVENTING GUN VIOLENCE**

Call for Action to Prevent Gun Violence in the United States of America  
 Interdisciplinary Group on Preventing School and Community Violence