

Evidence-Based School Threat Assessment

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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

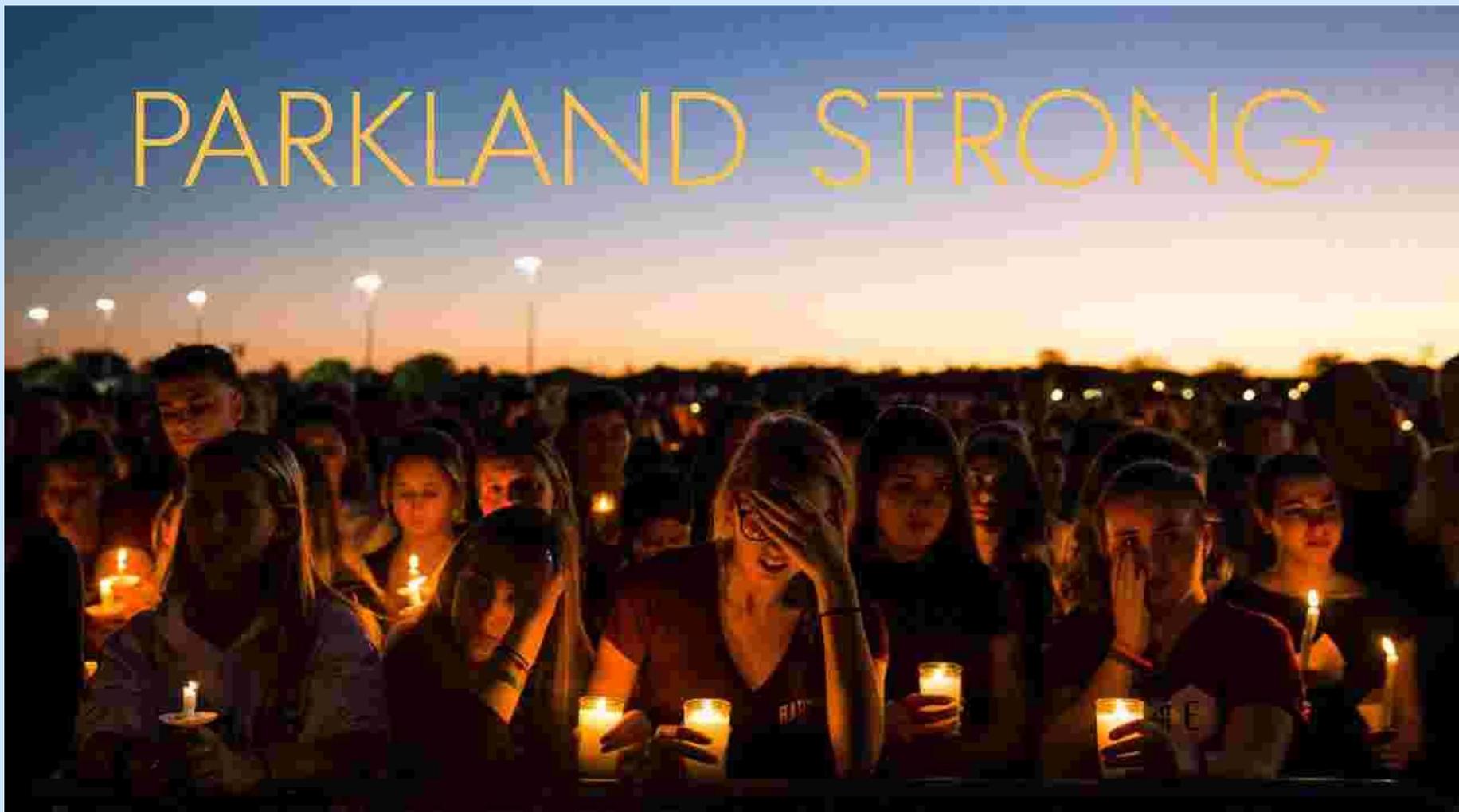
- 1. Decisions about school safety must be based on facts, not fear.**
- 2. School violence is a small part of the larger problem of gun violence.**
- 3. We need more emphasis on prevention than security.**
- 4. One prevention strategy is evidence-based school threat assessment, which can identify serious threats and help prevent violence.**

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.

PARKLAND STRONG



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

301 School Shootings In America Since 2013

MAPS

GUNS IN PUBLIC PLACES

All

2013

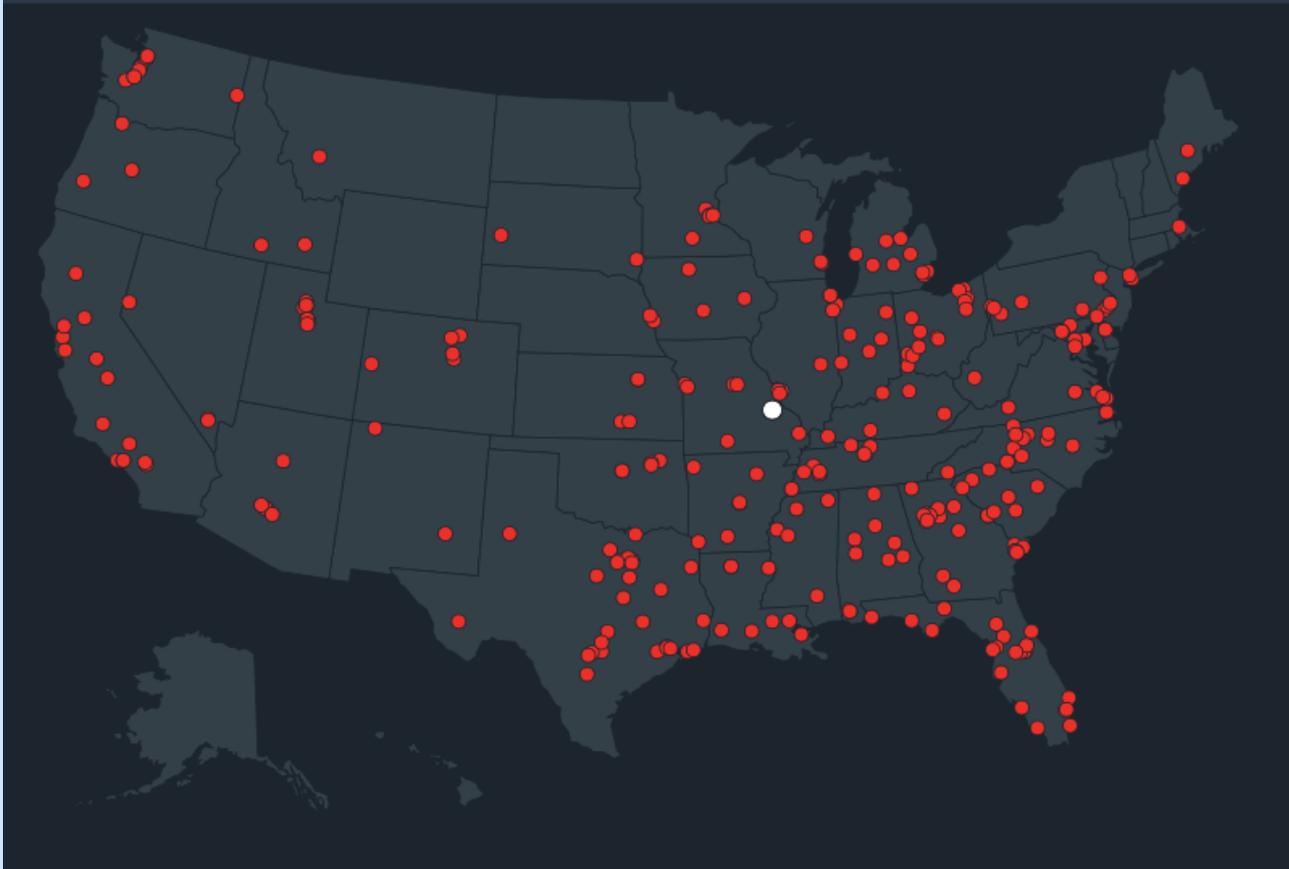
2014

2015

2016

2017

2018



301 School Shootings In America Since 2013

MAPS

GUNS IN PUBLIC PLACES

All

2013

2014

2015

2016

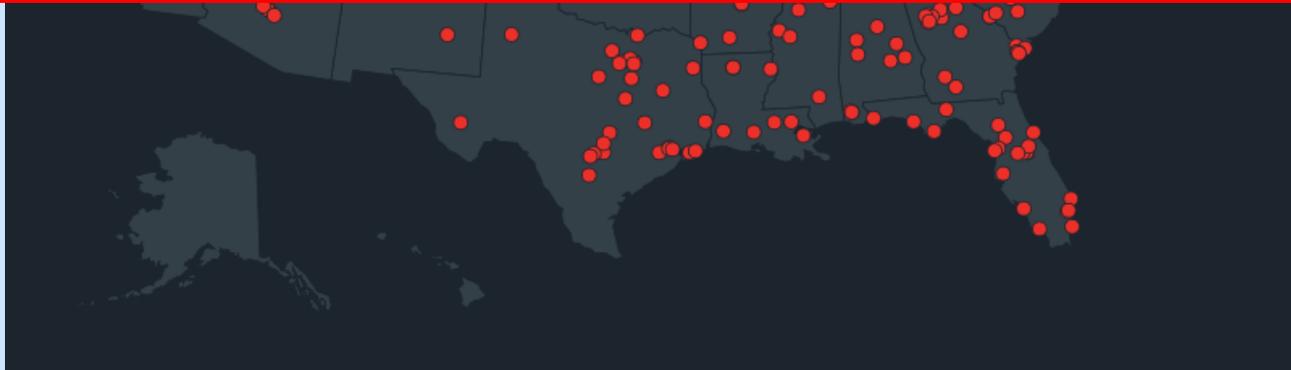
2017

2018

5 yrs x 100,000 =

500,000

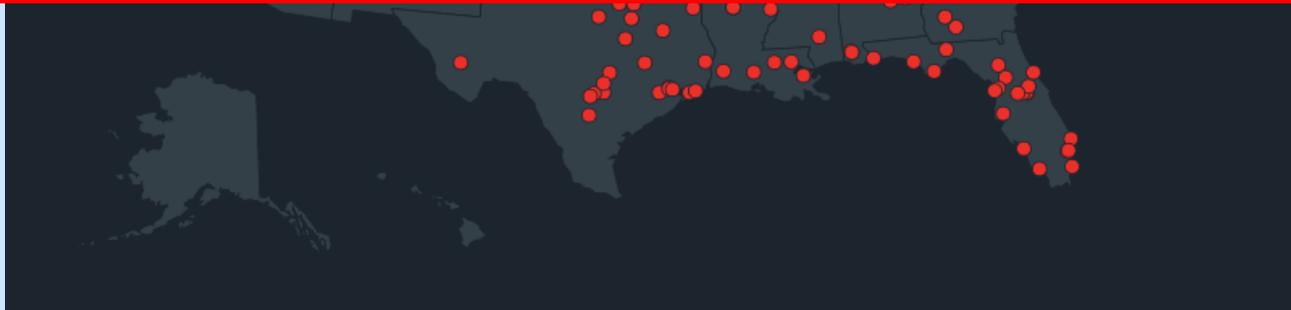
outside of schools



301 School Shootings In America Since 2013

MADE GUNS IN PUBLIC PLACES

**For every shooting in a school,
there are 1,600+ outside of
schools**



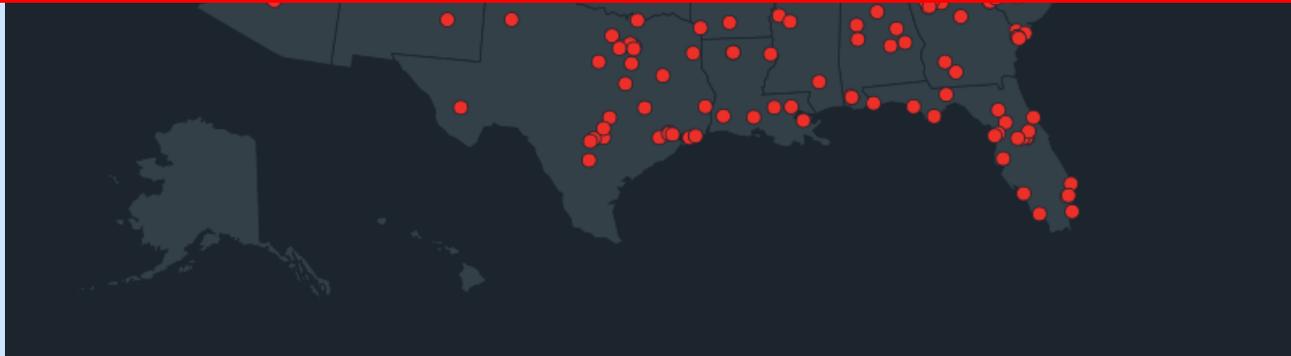
301 School Shootings In America Since 2013

MAPS

GUNS IN PUBLIC PLACES

**If schools were impregnable, it
would only stop .06% of
shootings**

Less than 1 tenth of 1 percent



301 School Shootings In America Since 2013

MAPS

GUNS IN PUBLIC PLACES

All

2013

2014

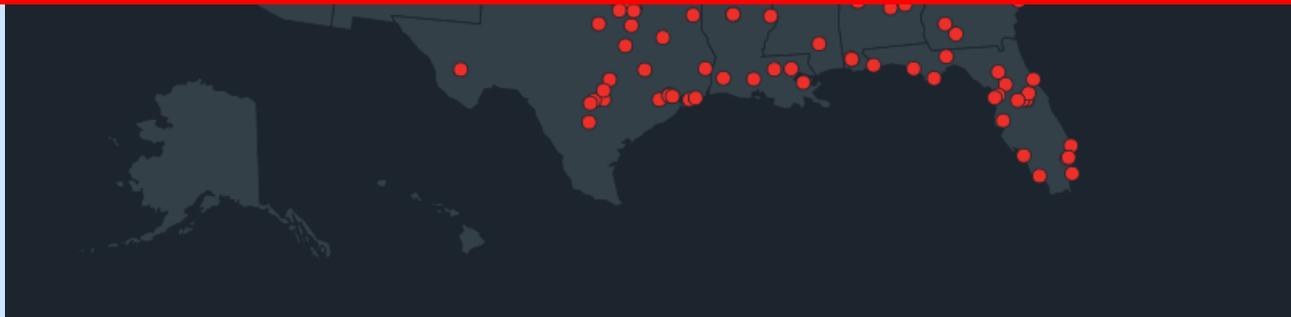
2015

2016

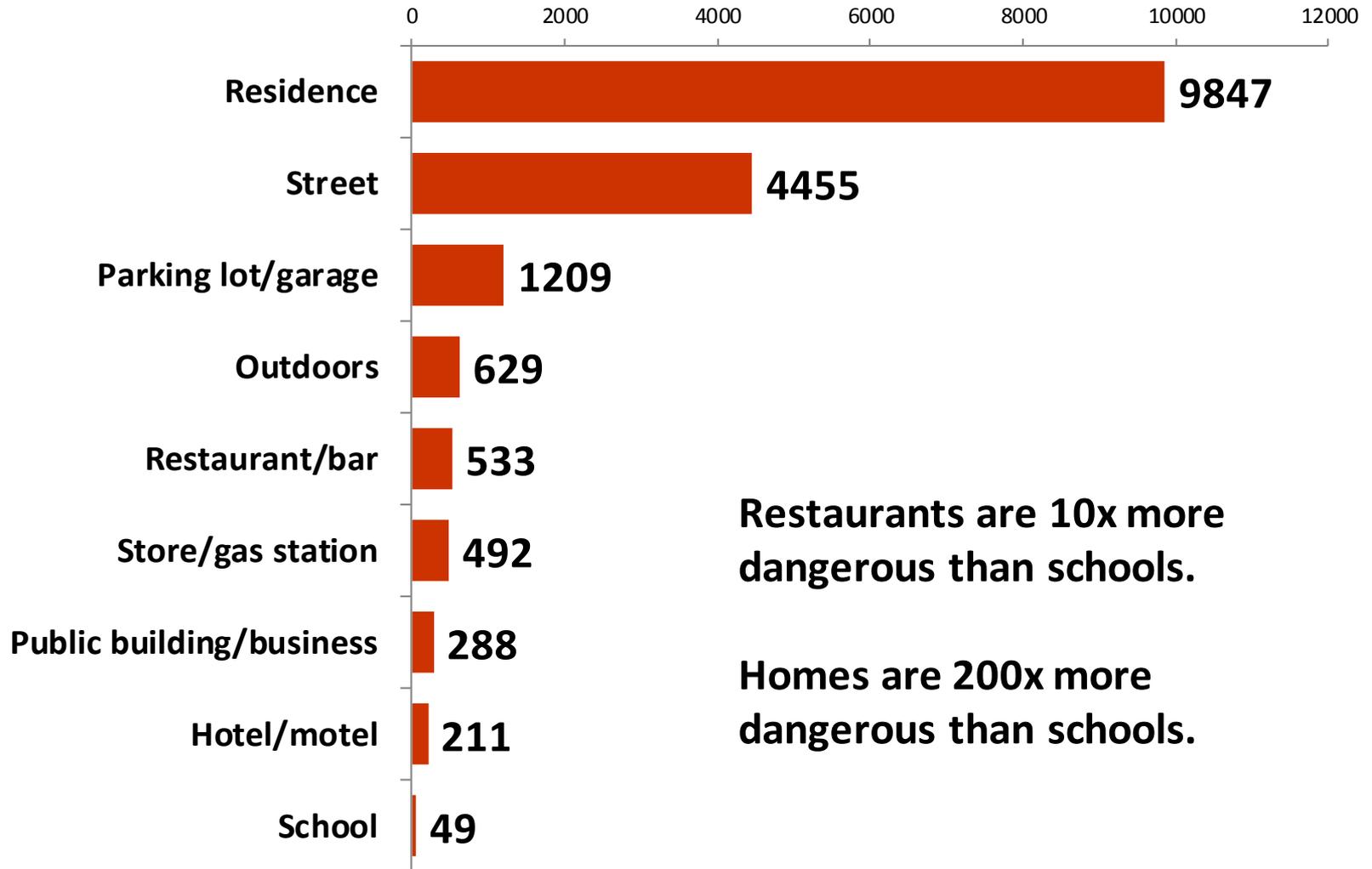
2017

2018

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



2005-2010 Homicides in 37 States



Source: FBI National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS) database. Selected locations. School includes colleges. See Nekvasil & Cornell (2015) *Psychology of Violence*, 5, 236-245.

Why the Fear of School Violence Matters

BloombergBusiness

News Markets Insights Video

Newtown Rampage Spurs \$5 Billion School Security Spending

November 14, 2013 – 12:00 AM EST



■ Almost 90 percent of U.S. school systems have made changes to their facilities or security policies since the Sandy Hook shooting, according to a survey of 600 districts that will be published next month in Campus Safety Magazine, a trade publication.

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

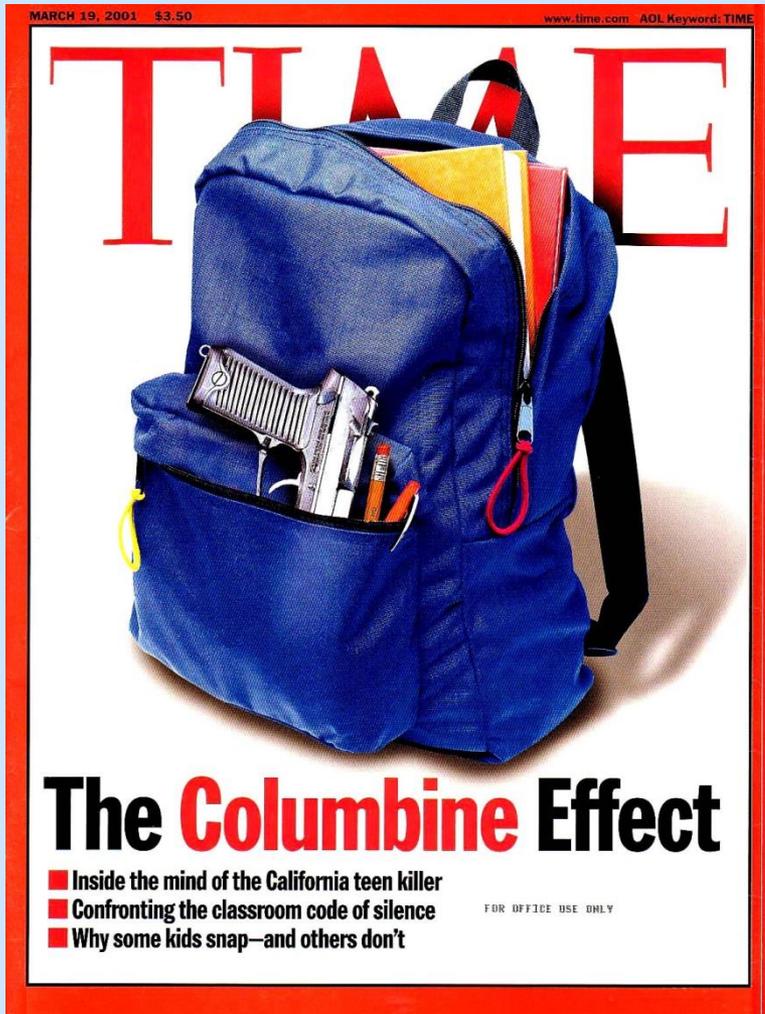
School security measures are expensive and deprive schools of resources that could be allocated to preventive measures such as anti-bullying programs and counseling services.

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**.*

The *Expansion* of Zero Tolerance

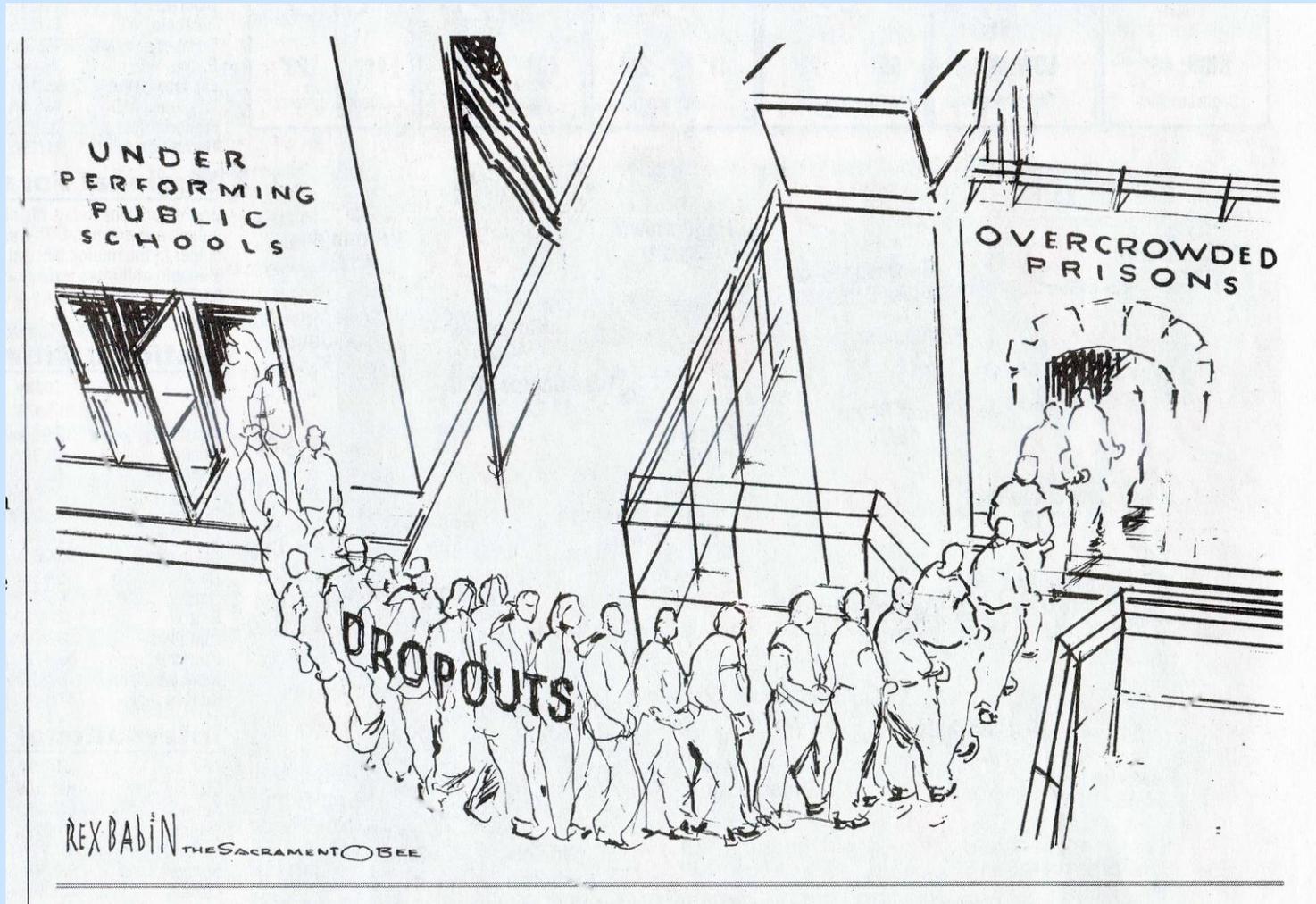


From No Guns to

- No Toy Guns
- No Nail clippers
- No Plastic utensils
- No Finger-pointing
- No Jokes
- No Drawings
- No Rubber band shooting

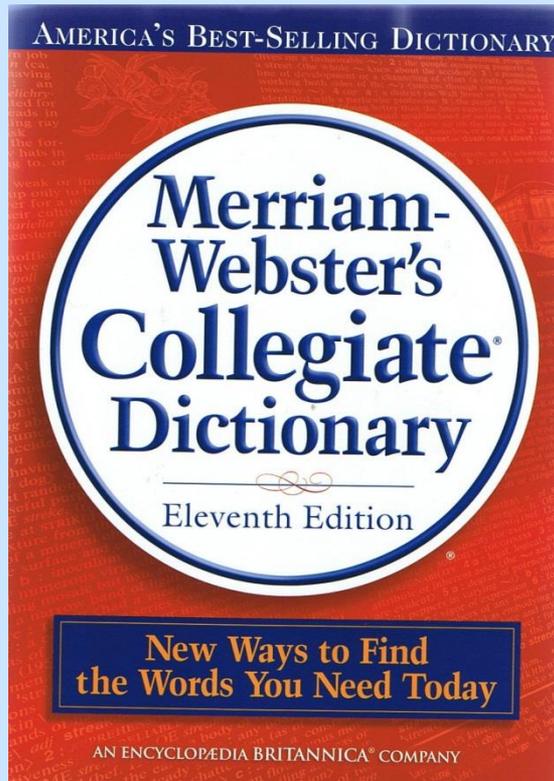
No accidental violations

3.3 Million Suspensions Per Year Fuel the School to Prison Pipeline



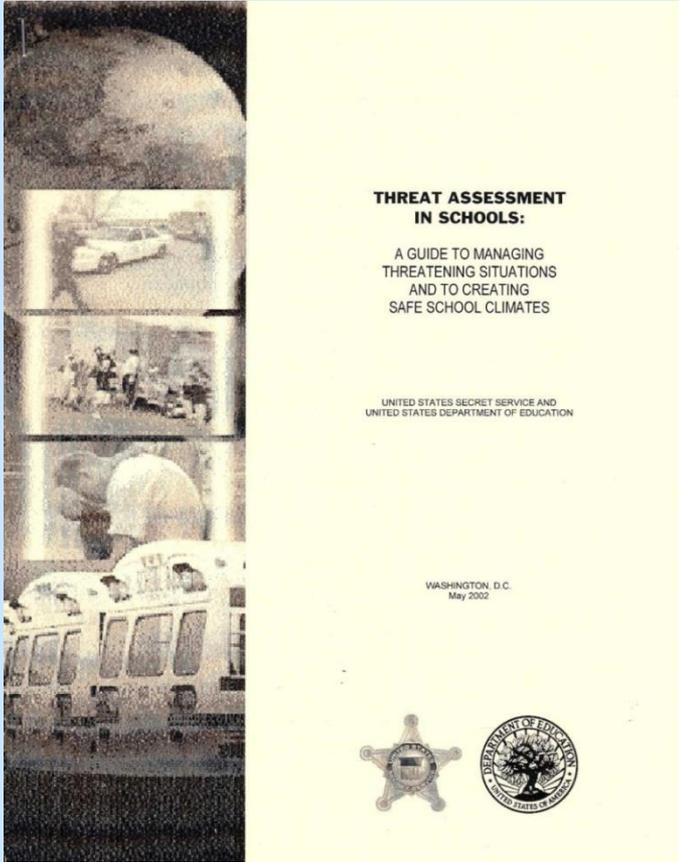
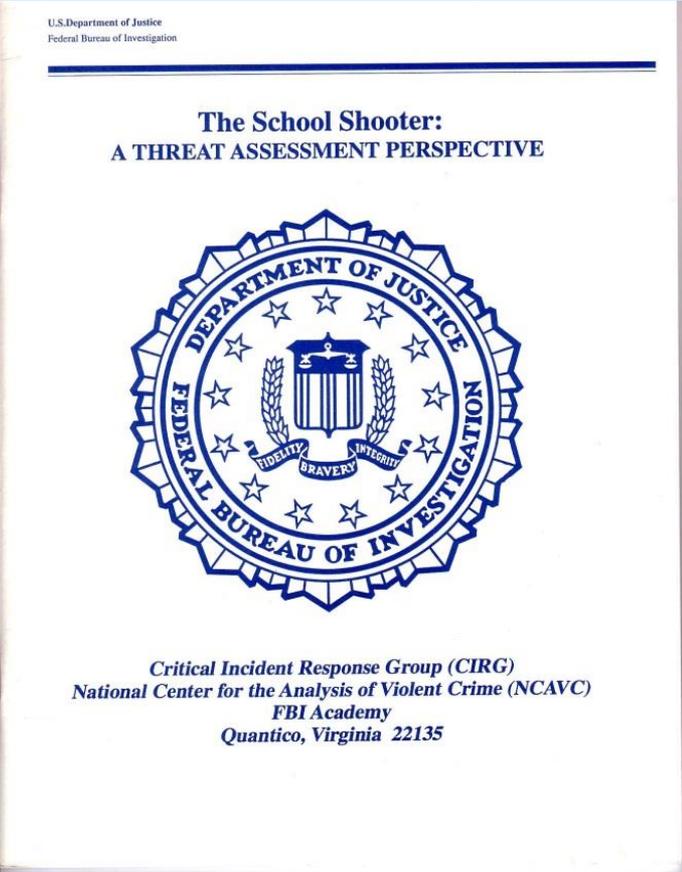
**We should prevent
shootings rather than
simply prepare for
them.**

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



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

The FBI, Secret Service, and Dept of Education recommended a threat assessment approach nearly 20 years ago.



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 is a violence prevention strategy.

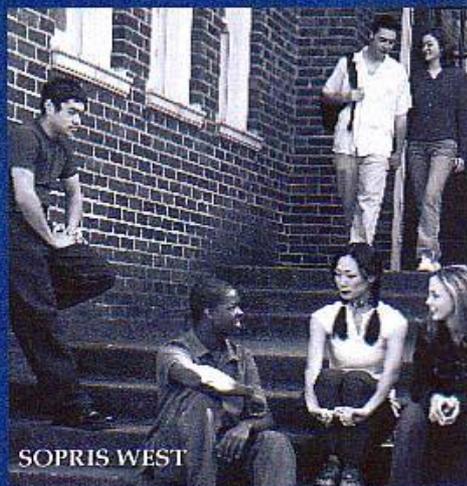
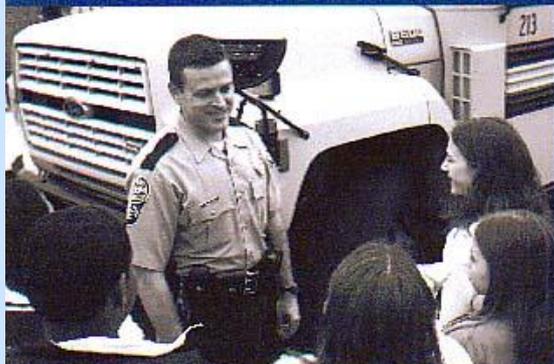
1. Family members, friends, or others seek help when concerned about someone in distress or who is threatening violence.
2. The threat assessment team evaluates the seriousness of the threat.
3. The team initiates assistance to address the underlying problem, conflict or need. In the most serious cases, protective action is taken.

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.

DEWEY CORNELL & PETER SHERAS

GUIDELINES FOR RESPONDING TO STUDENT THREATS OF VIOLENCE



SOPRIS WEST

- **Threat assessment must be adapted for schools.**
- **Recognize developmental issues in children, social context of school.**
- **Goal is not punishment but successful education and healthy development.**

Accurate Threat Assessment Avoids 2 Errors ...

1. Over-reaction

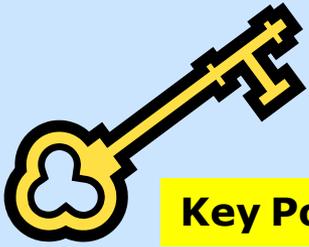
School Suspends Second Grader for Eating
His Pop-Tart Into the Shape of a Gun



Accurate Threat Assessment Avoids 2 Errors ...

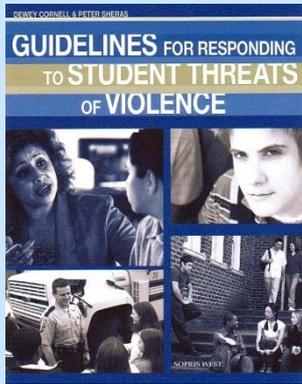
2. Under-Reaction





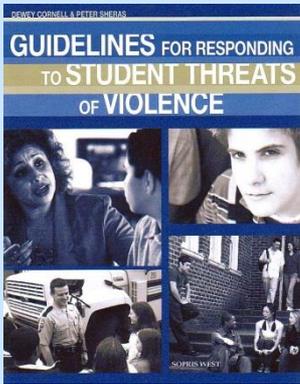
Key Point

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.



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 § 9.1-184. Such policies shall include procedures for referrals to community services boards 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 division superintendent shall establish, for each school, a threat assessment team that shall include persons with expertise in counseling, instruction, 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 aberrant 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.



Key Points about School Threat Assessment

1. Must be adapted for schools.
2. Avoid criminalizing students.
3. Provide help where needed.
4. Need systematic training and research to maintain effectiveness.

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

Interdisciplinary Group on Preventing School and Community Violence

Endorsed by 240+ organizations and 4,000+ 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

1st 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.

2nd 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

3rd 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.

Ron Avi Astor, Ph.D., University of Southern California
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Daniel Flannery, Ph.D., Case Western Reserve University
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Pedro Noguera, Ph.D., University of California, Los Angeles
David Osher, Ph.D., Takoma Park, MD
Russell Skiba, Ph.D., Indiana University
George Sugai, Ph.D., University of Connecticut
Daniel W. Webster, Sc.D., Johns Hopkins University
Mark D. Weist, Ph.D., University of South Carolina

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.**
- 3. Threat assessment can help schools respond to student threats.**

YOUTH VIOLENCE PROJECT

- ▶ CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS
- ▶ OUR STAFF
- ▶ PUBLICATIONS
- ▶ REPORTS & SUMMARIES
- ▶ RESOURCES

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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.



YVP Team Conducting Statewide School Climate Study

Our 4-year federally-funded project has yielded strong support for an authoritative school climate.

▶ [READ MORE](#)

PREVENTING GUN VIOLENCE

[Call for Action to Prevent Gun Violence In the United States of America](#)

Interdisciplinary Group on Preventing School and Community Violence