COLORADO CHILDREN'S CAMPAIGN
Every Chance for Every Child

SAFE SCHOOL ENVIRONMENTS: RESEARCH, POLICY, AND INVESTMENTS IN COLORADO

Schools should be safe places for young people, educators, school staff, and community members, and policies and practices can help create learning environments where kids thrive. Gun violence in U.S. schools has prompted calls for increased school safety measures; however, which policies contribute to safe school environments is often a topic of debate.

How can schools create safe environments while also fostering welcoming, equitable school climates that support growth, learning, and community? To help Colorado policymakers and school communities answer this question, the Colorado Children's Campaign has identified and compiled research on strategies that are supported by strong evidence.

While school safety can be defined broadly as freedom from physical, emotional, and psychological violence, this brief focuses on promoting freedom from bodily harm in a school setting. Strategies that support students' well-being and prevent bullying, fighting, the use of weapons, and other types of violence can contribute to reducing harm.

Our review of the research suggests that:

- Prevention strategies such as establishing positive school climates, supporting young people's mental and behavioral health, and introducing particular evidence-based threat assessment programs can effectively address violence within schools – and implementing these programs well requires funding and support.
- While school resource officers can play a role in reducing some types of violence, there is little evidence that they prevent school shootings. There is evidence that they can exacerbate racial disparities in school discipline and educational attainment.
- Though research on preventing school shootings is limited, gun policy plays a clear role in the frequency of mass shootings nationwide. There are evidence-based strategies that can reduce the risk for gun violence in schools.

In recent years, Colorado policymakers and school communities have taken steps to prevent school violence – but we must continue work to create safer schools and communities by advancing evidence-based policies and programs.

HOW COMMON IS VIOLENCE IN SCHOOLS?

Many types of school violence have decreased over the last few decades. Instances of in-school theft and criminal victimization (rape, sexual assault, aggravated assault, and simple assault) have fallen substantially since 2009.[1] The National Center on Education Statistics credits these reductions to changes in school procedures and potentially to disruptions of in-person school during the pandemic.

However, school shootings have become more common over time. According to a database compiled by The Washington Post, nearly 350,000 students nationwide in 376 schools have experienced gun violence in schools since the Columbine High School shooting in 1999. There were 46 school shootings in 2022 – more than in any previous year.[2] Reports of shootings in and around schools tripled between the 2018-19 and 2021-22 school years, and the number of guns seized in schools in the 2022-23 school year was 40% higher than the previous school year and 80% higher than pre-pandemic.[3] The Washington Post found that Black and Hispanic children are disproportionately likely to experience gun violence in schools.

WHICH PREVENTION STRATEGIES ARE EFFECTIVE IN REDUCING VIOLENCE IN SCHOOLS?

A large body of research identifies risk and protective factors associated with youth violence in schools. • Students who experience risk factors like high emotional stress, exposure to violence, low parental attachment and monitoring, and social rejection from their peers are at higher risk of engaging in violent behavior, as are those who use drugs and alcohol.[4] Family connectedness, motivation around school performance, exposure to healthy school climates, and a positive social orientation at school are protective factors that help prevent young people from engaging in violence.

School violence prevention strategies that aim to mitigate violence risk factors or strengthen protective factors among students have shown promising results. The following prevention strategies are supported by research findings and align with expert recommendations from the Colorado School Safety Resource Center (CSSRC), the American Public Health Association, the National Association of School Psychologists, and the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation. These strategies are likely to have the strongest impacts on the entire student population of a school when used in tandem.

PREVENTION STRATEGY	WHAT DOES THE RESEARCH SAY?
In-school mental health services and behavioral interventions	Research from the last two decades finds that in-school mental health services and behavioral interventions by school counselors, psychologists, social workers, and nurses – as well as by parents and other services in the community – can be effective responses to a variety of emotional and behavioral issues.[5] Intervention programs focusing on aggression have been shown to significantly decrease aggressive behaviors among students.[6] Some research indicates that comprehensive human sexuality education offered in schools is associated with reductions in both sexual violence and other types of harm.[7]
Positive school climate	The school environment plays a significant role in setting the stage for safety.[8] Three national studies have demonstrated that schools with students who report feeling more connected to their school and trusted adults tend to have less violence.[9]
Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS)	PBIS is a school-wide curriculum that explicitly teaches behavioral expectations to students. Two studies found reductions in suspensions, discipline referrals, and bullying among students as reported by teachers in schools where PBIS curriculum was implemented.[10] PBIS is the conceptual foundation for what is commonly known as a multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS) – a framework that helps schools and teachers provide tailored academic and behavioral support to students.
Evidence-Based Threat Assessment and Management	One evidence-based violence prevention model, the Comprehensive School Threat Assessment Guidelines (CSTAG), focuses on de-escalation by recognizing early signs of student conflict. Students at schools using the CSTAG reported less bullying and more positive perceptions of school climate.[11] When examining students who made violent threats, those attending schools using this model were more likely to receive counseling and parent conferences.[12] It is important to implement threat assessment strategies with attention to student privacy and to monitor for differential impacts, especially among students of color and students with disabilities.

ARE SCHOOL RESOURCE OFFICERS EFFECTIVE IN REDUCING VIOLENCE IN SCHOOLS?

According to federal data collected by Education Week, more than 9 of 10 are armed and most carry restraints like handcuffs.[13] Intergovernmental agreements between police or sheriffs and school districts dictate SROs' responsibilities, and SROs often use their discretion to determine whether an incident constitutes a criminal or disciplinary matter.[14]

Research on the effectiveness of SROs in schools is limited. SROs have been associated with decreases in some types of violent crime. But two national studies published in 2021 found the presence of SROs did not reduce gun-related violence.[16]

Although they are often trained to do so, police have no statutory nor constitutional duty to intervene in shootings to save lives. This "no duty to act" doctrine has been reaffirmed repeatedly by the U.S. Supreme Court and was relevant to the events and aftermath of the 2022 Robb Elementary School shooting in Uvalde, Texas. [17]

States have different standards for training SROs. Law enforcement agencies in Colorado are encouraged, but not required, to ensure that peace officers such as SROs have successfully completed a school resource officer training curriculum. In a 2018 Education Week Research Survey of SROs, "about 1 in 5 respondents said they didn't have sufficient training to work in a school environment, only 39% said they had training on child trauma, and about half said they hadn't been trained to work with special education students."

The presence of law enforcement in schools has been found to have a disproportionately negative effect on students of color. For instance, one report found that an increased presence of SROs was associated with an increase in suspensions, expulsions, and school-based arrests for minor misbehaviors. These increases in disciplinary and police actions were largest for Black students, male students, and students with disabilities.[18] Another found that students of color were disproportionately likely to experience assaults by police at school.[19]

ARE PHYSICAL SECURITY MEASURES EFFECTIVE AT REDUCING VIOLENCE IN SCHOOLS?

There is no high-quality evidence on the impacts of the following interventions intended to address violence, including shootings, in schools: entry control equipment, identification technology, and communication technology.[20] The few investigations into video cameras and metal detectors find that they may discourage behaviors such as vandalism or weapons carrying but have no clear effect on reducing violence.[21]

WHAT STRATEGIES ARE EFFECTIVE AT PREVENTING SHOOTINGS IN SCHOOLS?

School shootings cause significant fear and anxiety among students, parents, and school staff. More than half of U.S. teens worry about a shooting happening in their school, as do a significant portion of U.S. parents.[22] The available research on school shooting events and how to prevent them is limited. While these tragic events have increased in recent years, they are still relatively rare on a population level, making them difficult for researchers to study.

Some strategies that have been publicly debated in the wake of shootings in schools have little or no evidence base. For instance, there is no research on the effectiveness of arming staff in K-12 schools.[23] However, there are evidence-based strategies that can reduce the risk for gun violence, including teaching students and adults to report warning signs and developing and publicizing around-the-clock anonymous tip lines such as Safe2Tell.[24]

Lockdown drills, which have become more common in K-12 schools, appear to have a complex set of impacts on students. One study found that students who participated in drills felt more prepared, but also felt less safe in school. The Colorado School Safety Resource Center has compiled resources on how to conduct lockdown drills as effectively as possible, including best practices from the National Association of School Psychologists.[25]

And, importantly, gun policy plays a key role in mass shootings more broadly. Research has shown that states with higher rates of gun ownership and more relaxed gun laws have higher rates of mass shooting events.[26] In Colorado, a survey published in March 2023 showed that one in four high school students said they could obtain a loaded firearm within 24 hours.[27] This suggests that policy changes that reduce access to guns may help prevent school shootings. Even limited evidence from the U.S. shows that strengthening background check processes and child access prevention and establishing waiting periods for firearm purchases can reduce gun violence.[28]

WHAT IS THE CURRENT STATE OF SCHOOL SAFETY POLICIES AND INVESTMENTS IN COLORADO?

Colorado schools are already implementing evidence-based violence prevention strategies. The Colorado Department of Education (CDE) trains school staff in PBIS, but the most recent data point about trainings conducted is from 2014.[29] Many school districts conduct their own threat assessment processes.[30] The Colorado School Safety Resource Center (CSSRC) continues to provide guidance and resources for preventing targeted school violence and trains school teams in the Colorado Threat Assessment & Management Protocol (CTAMP), which is informed by the U.S. Secret Service and the FBI.[31] The state does not make publicly available data on how and where these violence prevention strategies are being implemented and whether they are demonstrating effectiveness, if those data are collected.

Measures the Colorado legislature has advanced to improve school safety in recent years include:

- **Senate Bill 20-023** established the Colorado Interagency Working Group on School Safety to study and implement recommendations regarding school safety, identify shared metrics, and examine program effectiveness. The group did not hold its first meeting until March 2023 because of a lack of funding.[32] The work group is expected to conclude its work by the end of 2023. Creating an inventory of information on the effectiveness of school safety and violence reduction strategies could allow for more evidence-based policymaking in future years.

- In the 2018 session, $35 million in one-time funds were directed to public schools for physical security upgrades, communication improvements, school personnel and school resource officer training, and emergency response team coordination. The School Security Disbursement (SSD) Grant Program received an additional $6 million for these purposes in **HB22-1120**, and an additional $16 million in **SB23-241**.[33] Senate Bill 23-241 also created an Office of School Safety to oversee the School Safety Resource Center and a newly created crisis response unit.

- **House Bill 22-1376** updated Colorado's restraint and seclusion policies and placed new limits on the handcuffing of students. It also required the development of a model policy to promote best practices and proper training for school security staff, including SROs.

- Changes to student discipline practices are included in **SB23-029**, which creates a school discipline task force to make recommendations on policies and reporting requirements and to define "disproportionate discipline" by 2024. **HB23-1291** clarifies and creates new requirements for expulsion hearings of students.

The legislature has also taken steps to expand mental and behavioral health resources for youth. Investment in the School Health Professional Grant Program, created in 2014 to increase the availability of school-based prevention, early intervention, and health care services and programs for school-aged students, has increased to $14 million per year. In 2022, school-based health centers received an additional $1.5 million through **SB22-147**. **House Bill 21-1258** created the I Matter program, which is managed by the Colorado Behavioral Health Administration and provides up to six free behavioral health sessions to Colorado youth. **House Bill 23-1003** allows for universal mental health screening of students and an expansion of the I Matter program, and **SB23-004** reduces barriers to licensure for mental health professionals working in schools.

Recently passed legislation limits access to firearms. **Senate Bill 23-169** increases the minimum age to purchase firearms from 18 to 21 years old, and **HB23-1219** establishes a three-day waiting period prior to the delivery of a purchased firearm. In 2021, **HB21-1106** required that firearms be responsibly and securely stored when not in use to prevent access by unsupervised children and other unauthorized users.

Federal funds have provided opportunities for Colorado. In 2018, CDE received a five-year School Climate Transformation Grant from the U.S. Department of Education to support evidence-based climate improvement strategies, including PBIS, dropout prevention, and trauma-informed practices to effectively address several early warning indicators. CDE also received $9.3 million through the Stronger Connections Grant established by the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act (BSCA) in 2022. Funds can be used for activities that foster "safe, healthy, supportive, and drug-free environments and support students' academic achievement."[34] The grant application opened in the spring of 2023.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES AND POLICY CONSIDERATIONS

"A Framework for Safe and Successful Schools," coauthored by the National Association of School Resource Officers, the American School Counselor Association, the National Association of School Psychologists, the School Social Work Association of America, the National Association of Elementary School Principals, and the National Association of Secondary School Principals, outlines best practices and policy considerations for supporting school safety.[35] Recommendations from the report include:

1. Allow for blended, flexible use of funding streams in education and mental health services;

2. Improve staffing ratios to allow for the delivery of a full range of services and effective school–community partnerships;

3. Develop evidence-based standards for district-level policies to promote effective school discipline and positive behavior;

4. Fund continuous and sustainable crisis and emergency preparedness, response, and recovery planning and training that uses evidence-based models;

5. Provide incentives for intra- and interagency collaboration; and

6. Use multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS). Colorado defines MTSS as "a prevention-based framework of team-driven, data-based problem solving for improving the outcomes of every student…through a layered continuum of evidence-based practices."[36]

In 2019, a coalition of national and state organizations led by the Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights signed onto "Civils Rights Principles for Safe, Healthy, and Inclusive School Climates," which details eight principles that should be incorporated into any school climate legislation considered by Congress.[37]

The U.S. Department of Education released its own set of "Guiding Principles for Creating Safe, Inclusive, Supportive, and Fair School Climates" in March of 2023.[38] The five principles are:

1. Foster a sense of belonging through a positive, safe, welcoming, and inclusive school environment;
2. Support the social, emotional, physical, and mental health needs of all students through evidence-based strategies;
3. Adequately support high-quality teaching and learning by increasing educator capacity;
4. Recruit and retain a diverse educator workforce; and
5. Ensure the fair administration of student discipline policies in ways that treat students with dignity and respect.

SCHOOLSAFETY.GOV

In 2020, the federal government launched SchoolSafety.gov, an interagency "one-stop shop" for information, resources, guidance, and evidence-based practices on a range of school safety topics and threats. The site provides a Safety Readiness Tool to assess schools' "oundational elements of school safety" and suggest improvements in categories such as designated staff, school climate, reporting systems, threat assessment, and staff and student training.[39]

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The Colorado Children's Campaign extends its thanks to the following people and organizations for their input on this report:

Chris Harms, Director, Colorado School Safety Resource Center
Dr. Beverly Kingston, Director and Senior Research Associate, Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence at the University of Colorado, Boulder
Finessa Ferrell, Social Emotional Learning Specialist, Colorado Education Initiative
Rhett Gutierrez, Policy Director at the Office of Children's Affairs, City and County of Denver
Andrea Pulskamp, State Transformation Specialist, Colorado Department of Education
Kayla Tawa, Youth Policy Analyst, Center on Law and Social Policy (CLASP)
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