# Violent Threats and Incidents in Schools:

## An Analysis of the 2018-2019 School Year

During the 2018-2019 school year, schools across the United States continued to work to improve their level of preparedness for a crisis event. Unfortunately, commonly held beliefs and fears, as well as the prevailing media narrative, are often contradictory to the reality of the types of hazards schools actually face. As a result, well-intentioned security interventions, or aggressive, intimidating training and drills often created negative, far-reaching unintended consequences: adding to the fears already held by educators, students and parents.

In order to make strategic, intentional decisions about how to prepare and empower educators to effectively prevent and respond to crisis events, this report provides a data-driven understanding of the frequency and nature of violent threats and incidents in schools.

This is the annual report for the 2018-2019 school year released by the Educator's School Safety Network, a national non-profit school safety organization. As part of on-going, unfunded research, the organization has compiled data on threats and incidents of violence, including school-based bomb incidents, since 2014. Their research is derived from daily tracking and analysis of school-based incidents and threats of violence in the United States.

Data and prior reports were on the front page of *USA Today*, and featured in the *New York Times, Washington Post, LA Times, NPR, BBC News, Newsweek* as well as numerous other national and international publications.

Researched and written by

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For more information, training opportunities, or to download the full report, visit

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# Overview and Summary

More than a year after the horrific shooting at Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, a national conversation continues around violence in schools. Commonly held beliefs, parent and student fears, and the prevailing media narrative all say that the most likely threat a school faces is that of an active shooter. Although such events are horrific, data indicates these tragedies are exceedingly rare.

As noted in the key findings of this report, the greatest threat to the safety of schools is not an active shooter event. In fact, there are critical unintended consequences associated with undertaking any and all interventions in the name of active shooter response. Perhaps more troubling, this perception of the single, overwhelming threat of an active shooter has become a wide-spread belief that has negatively impacted all-hazards preparedness and potentially decreased the overall safety of schools.

Now more than ever, there is a critical need to move beyond speculation and anecdotes about school safety to a data-based analysis of the threats and incidents of violence that have occurred in K-12 United States schools during the 2018-2019 school year. The Educator's School Safety Network (ESSN), a national non-profit school safety organization, has compiled the most current information on threats and incidents of violence in America's schools to examine the frequency, scope, and severity of the problem.

# Key Findings

## 1. In the 2018-2019 school year, only 6% of all tracked incidents involved a school shooting.

Despite high levels of media attention, and the common perception that school shootings are the most significant risk schools face, only 6% of all tracked violent incidents involved an active shooter event in a school. An additional 4.5% of tracked incidents involved shots being fired on school grounds. Even with the inclusion of the tracked incidents where a gun was found in a school but not fired (13.6% of incidents), the total of all violent incidents that were related to the presence or use of guns in a school was less than a quarter (24%) of all the events that occurred.
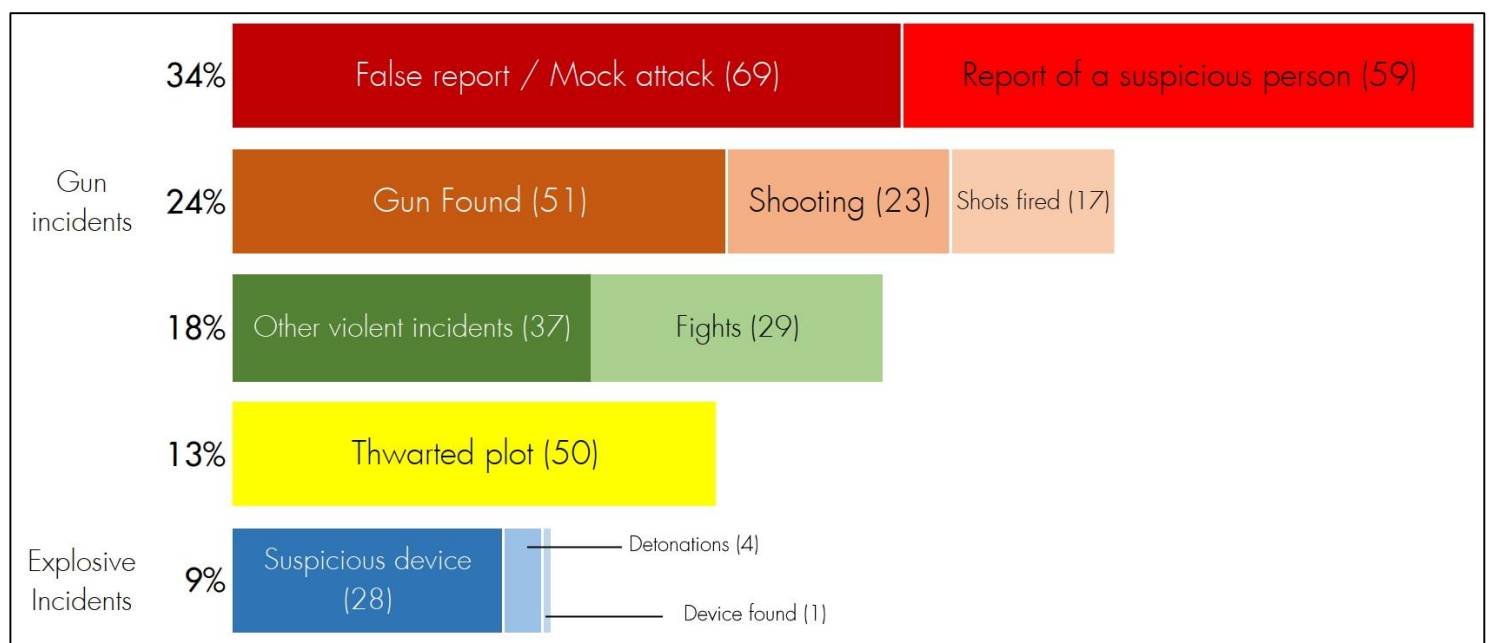
Only
6% of all
tracked
incidents involved
a shooting

For the purpose of this report, an incident was categorized as a "shooting" when shots were deliberately fired on the campus of a school with the intent to cause harm. An event was categorized as "shots fired" when a weapon was discharged on school grounds in an incident that was not considered targeted violence.

This finding warrants an examination of the amount of time and resources currently spent preparing solely to respond to an event that is potentially devastating, but statistically rare. The need for active shooter preparation and training is critical, however, it is not the only (or most likely) hazard schools face. Harvard lecturer David Ropeik reasons that despite our common perception of the risk, "the statistical likelihood of any given public school student being killed by a gun, in school, on any given day since 1999 was roughly 1 in 614,000,000".[i]  It is likely that the increased awareness and fear of active shooter attacks has resulted in the belief that the actual number of these events has also increased. Although many of the effects of this over-emphasis on a statistically unlikely event at the exclusion of more likely crises are not measured in this study, the most commonly tracked incident, a response occasioned by a false report or mock attack, is directly related and discussed in finding #2 below.

## 2. Throughout the 2018-2019 school year, schools faced a wide array of different types of violent incidents.

The most common incidents tracked in the 2018-2019 school year were false reports or mock attacks, which accounted for 18% of all incidents. This is a sharp increase from the rate tracked in previous school years, and indicates that the fear of a school shooting can be effectively weaponized by perpetrators to cause chaos, fear, and disruption, as well as provoke a tactical law enforcement response. As discussed in finding #1 above, the belief that school shootings happen frequently, or the fear that they are imminent or inevitable, may also result in erroneous reports of lower level incidents as active shooter events.

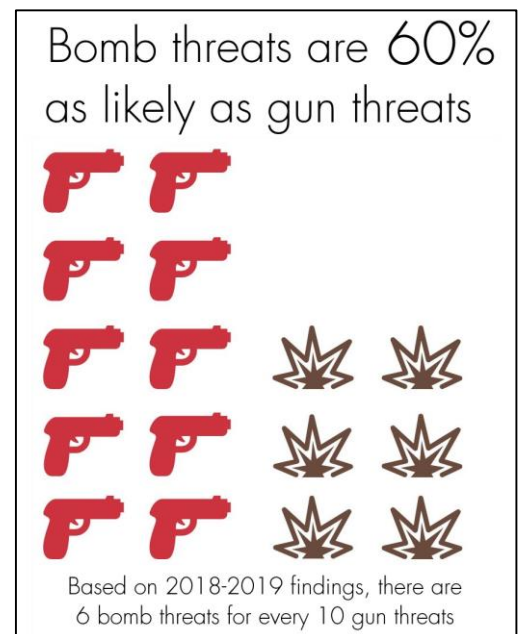| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 34% | False report / Mock attack (69) | Report of a suspicious person (59) |
| Gun incidents 24% | Gun Found (51) | Shooting (23) · Shots fired (17) |
| 18% | Other violent incidents (37) · Fights (29) | |
| 13% | Thwarted plot (50) | |
| Explosive Incidents 9% | Suspicious device (28) · Detonations (4) · Device found (1) | |

The high rate of simulated or falsely reported attacks, combined with the significant number of reports of suspicious people in or near a school (15.8%), accounted for 34% of all incidents. More than a third of tracked incidents that disrupted schools and required multi-agency responses were predicated on the high level of concern and anxiety that school stakeholders have about an active shooter event.

While this focus on gun violence is not without validity (as 24% of violent incidents were gun-related), violent incidents in schools encompassed a wide array of events, including 18% of incidents where violent, aggressive behaviors occurred in schools without the presence of a gun. These included outside aggressive actors such as disruptive parents or trespassers, large-scale student fights, and other less frequent but equally concerning events such as attempted abductions, dating violence, and assaults. This raises questions about the lack of training, preparedness, and resource allocation in schools for non-gun related violent events that are more statistically likely to pose a threat to the safety of students.

## 3. Bomb threats and bomb incidents continued to disrupt schools in the 2018-2019 school year.

The original intent of this research and series of reports was to measure the frequency of bomb incidents and threats. Although the scope of each subsequent report has expanded to include other types of violence, school-based bombing incidents, suspicious packages, and bomb threats remain concerns that are inadequately addressed in current policies, training, and resources. Bomb threats accounted for 32% of all specified threats, while bomb incidents (detonations, devices, and suspicious packages) accounted for 9% of all tracked violent incidents. The frequency (and the lack of preparedness that makes it particularly concerning) has remained largely unchanged since this research begin in 2014.



Bomb threats are 60% as likely as gun threats

Based on 2018-2019 findings, there are 6 bomb threats for every 10 gun threats

As discussed in previous reports, school administrators and law enforcement officials continue to find themselves in the untenable position of having to make critical decisions about the validity of threats with little to no threat assessment protocols, few established best practices, outdated procedures, and typically, a complete lack of education-based school safety training. **More alarmingly, while the 88 gun related incidents noted in 2018-2019 is clearly unacceptable, current training and planning practices that focus solely on active shooter response result in a school being inadequately prepared to prevent and respond to the majority of violent incidents (78%) that do not involve gun violence.** This single emphasis also compromises educators' abilities to plan for, prevent, and respond to crisis events that are not man-made, but much more likely, such as accidents, medical emergencies, and severe weather events. There is a critical need for a comprehensive, all-hazards approach to threats and incidents that incorporates both violence prevention and response.

# Additional Findings

*In the 2018-2019 school year, more than 3,434 threats and incidents of violence occurred in American K-12 schools, with actual incidents of violence increasing from the 2017-2018 school year.*

## The number of threats in 2018-2019 decreased 9.5% from the previous year.

While the 3,058 threats reported in the 2018-2019 school year were a 9.5% decrease from the year before, this was still an increase of 46.6% from the 2016-2017 school year. For the purposes of this research, 'threats' are defined as an expressed intent to do harm.



9.5%
DECREASE
3,380
2017-2018
3,058
2018-2019

While it may be a positive sign that the number of actual threats decreased, the rate at which schools experienced threats is still significantly higher than in the past. It is also important to consider that an increase in the number of threats reported over time may not necessarily be entirely negative. A heightened awareness and adoption of a "see something, say something" perspective by school stakeholders is a positive trend that may account for at least some of the increased number of reported threats. This does not change the reality, however, that threats of violence continue to be a significant concern impacting schools.
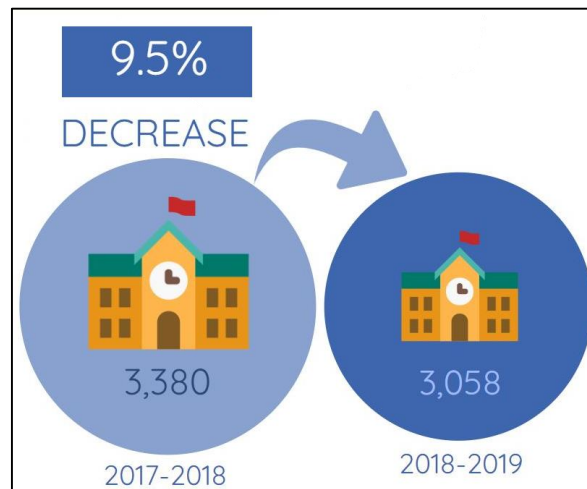
## The number of violent incidents increased 34% from the previous year.



34%
Increase
279
2017-2018
374
2018-2019
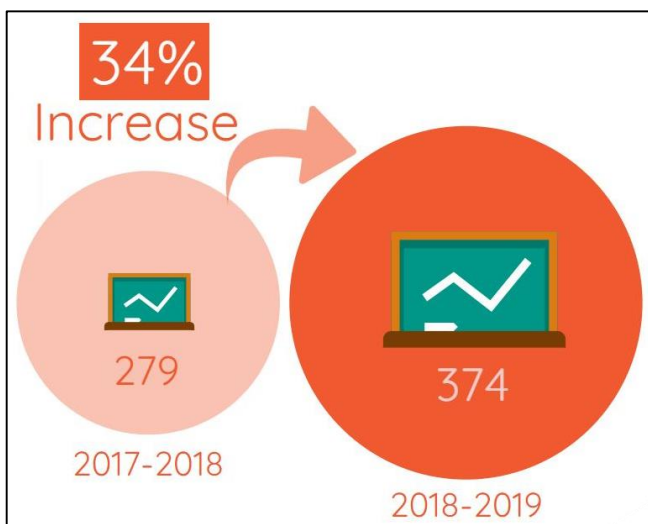
The continued increase in actual incidents of violence is of greater concern. The 2018-2019 school year included at least 374 incidents of violence compared to 279 events in the 2017-2018 school year, an increase of 34%. While this year's increase is less dramatic than the 113% increase experienced from 2016-2017 to 2017-2018, the overall trajectory during the three-year time period is a startling increase of 185.5%.

In this report, an incident is defined as an actual occurrence that requires a response extending beyond a school's regular capabilities. While the rate of violent events

continues to increase, the majority of these incidents were not active shooter events. In fact, the most common occurrence (18.4% of all incidents) were false reports of a violent intruder or mock attacks that resulted in a law enforcement response.

## Threats of violence - Types of threats

The most common threats recorded in the 2018-2019 school year were unspecified threats of violence (47.4% of all threats), shooting threats (28.2% of all threats), and bomb threats (16.9% of all threats).
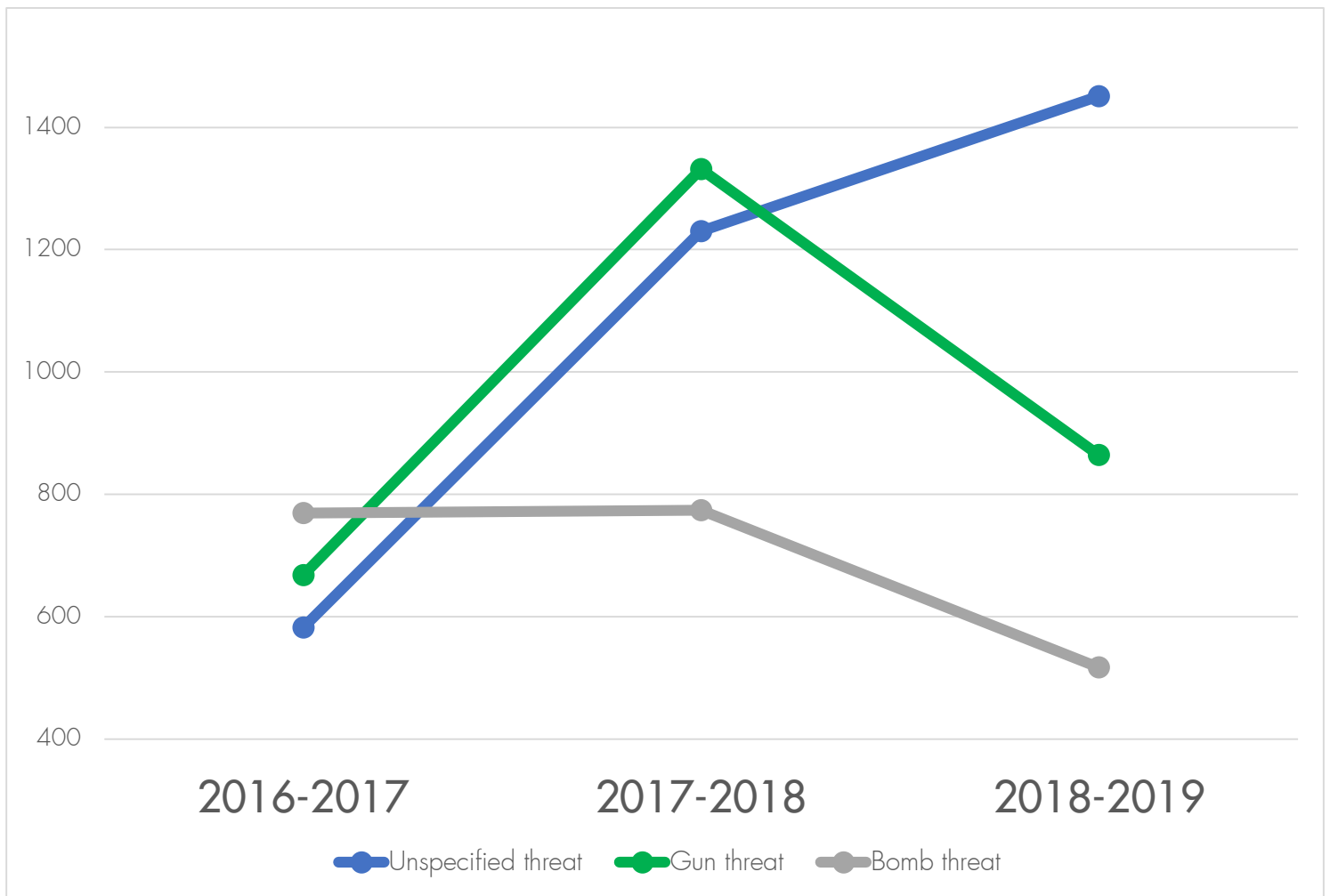


The most significant trend in this area is the continued increase in unspecified threats. This may largely be due to a choice on the part of school officials or emergency responders to not divulge specific information about threats received. While this may make sense in a given situation, it makes it difficult to identify whether specific types of threats are increasing or decreasing. In a small number of situations, the threat itself was an expressed intent to do harm that did not contain any specifics as to the means for doing so.

When considering the distribution of known threats (those that are categorized as anything other than unspecified), 54% were threats of a shooting, followed by bomb threats at 32%. Other specified threats (typically referring to the simultaneous use of guns and bombs, fire, or some other named act of violence) accounted for 14% of known threats.

## Method of delivery of threats

While the method of delivery for a specific threat was not always reported, when it was known, social media was the most common source, accounting for 38% of all threats in the 2018-2019 school year. This is relatively unchanged from the previous two school years.
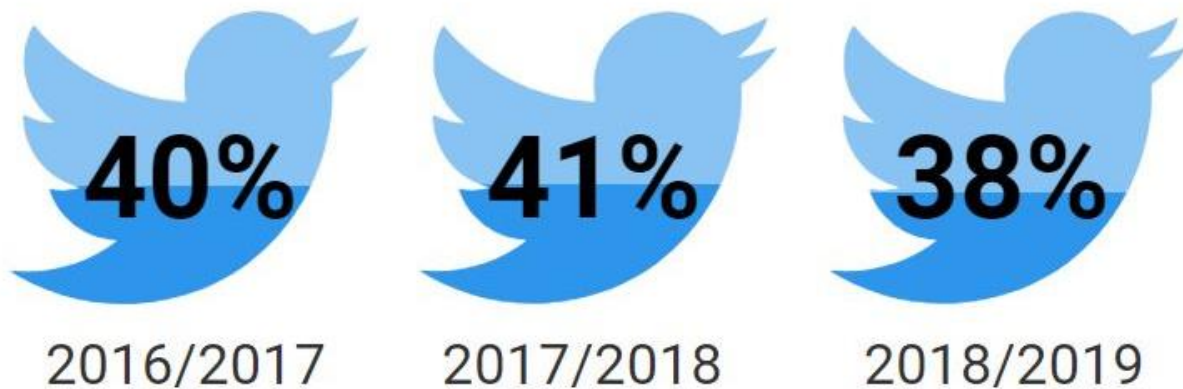


In 2018-2019 (as in 2017-2018), written threats were discovered within the school itself nearly 20% of the time, most commonly in the restroom. Verbal comments were the source of threats 8.6% of the time.

## Individuals who made threats of violence

While data related to the sex, age, and affiliation of those who made threats of violence was not always known or reported, it was tracked when available. During the 2018-2019 school year, 87% of all threats of violence came from students, a slight increase from 81% the previous year. Other adults were responsible for threats 7.3% of the time, also a slight increase from 6.8% in 2017-2018.  In both school years, parents and school staff accounted for less than 2% of all threats.



87% of the indivdiuals who made threats of violence were students

# Incidents of violence

## Types of incidents

| All Violent Incidents | |
|---|---|
| False report/Mock attack | 18.4% |
| Suspicious person | 15.8% |
| Gun found | 13.6% |
| Thwarted plot | 13.4% |
| Fights | 7.8% |
| Suspicious device | 7.5% |
| Incident | 6.7% |
| Shooting | 6.1% |
| Shots fired | 4.5% |
| Knife found | 2.4% |
| Detonation | 1.1% |
| Stabbing | 1.1% |
| Outside violence | 0.8% |
| Suicide | 0.5% |
| Device | 0.3% |

The most frequent incidents during the 2018-2019 school year were false reports or mock attacks (18.4% of all incidents), followed by reports of a suspicious person predicating a response (15.8% of all incidents), and thwarted plots (13.4% of all incidents).

As discussed earlier in this report, consideration should be given to the diverse array of violent incidents that occurred in schools during the 2018-2019 school year. More than 6.7% of tracked incidents were wide-ranging violent or aggressive behaviors by students or others which occurred at a higher rate than those of an active shooter. These events rose beyond the "typical" disciplinary or behavioral issues noted in schools, and required emergency response or law enforcement intervention.

More than 50 plots of violence against schools were thwarted in the 2018-2019 school year (13.4% of all tracked incidents). This is 10 more than the previous year, although in 2017-2018 thwarted plots accounted for more of the violent incidents (19%).

An explosive device was detonated in a school 4 times in the 2018-2019 school year, compared to once in 2017-2018, and twice in 2016-2017. The 28 suspicious packages reported in 2018-2019 was a slight increase from the two previous years as well.

## Individuals who perpetrated incidents violence

As was the case with threats, the majority (85%) of all violent incidents in the 2018-2019 school year were perpetrated by students followed by adults who were not parents or staff members (12%). The rate of violence by staff, parent, or non-student juvenile perpetrators was 1.2% or less for each group. As in threats, the majority of violent incidents (88%) were perpetrated by males.

**88%** of the individuals who perpetrated violence at schools were male.

# Recommendations

Although catastrophic events in schools may be rare, the potential for violence exists in all schools, every school day. The first critical step for improvement is to shift the thinking about school safety from an occasional concern or a fixation on an action shooter event, to an everyday, all hazards operation for educators that involves planning for, preventing, and responding to violent threats and incidents.

As a result of the findings of this annual report, and the ones that preceded it, the following recommendations should be considered:

1. **Training, resources, and emergency planning for schools needs to focus on an all-hazards approach to school safety.** The erroneous belief that active shooter events are the most significant hazard schools face leaves educators vulnerable and unprepared for the more likely crisis events they will encounter. In many cases, the only training educators receive is geared toward a school shooting, even though it is one of the least likely crisis events. This report only deals with violent incidents and threats and does not take into account the significant portion of crisis events in schools that are not man-made, such as accidents, medical emergencies, and severe weather events - all of which are even more likely than incidents of violence.

2. **The continued longitudinal increase in violent incidents and threats indicates that current school safety practices alone are not effective.** Historically most approaches to school safety have been response oriented, focused on gun violence, derived from a law enforcement perspective, and based heavily on the purchase of hardware. While these elements are an important part of a comprehensive approach to crisis planning and response, they are not enough. Preventing violence, not just responding to it, must become a priority. This can be achieved through research-based best practices such as threat assessment management, improving school climate and culture, applying appropriate supports and interventions to those at risk for violence, enacting effective supervision, implementing visitor engagement, and other educator-based initiatives. Perhaps most significantly, attention must be paid to the consequences of creating a prison-like, surveillance-based environment in schools, where students are viewed as potential perpetrators and educators are forced into security and policing roles.

3. **While response to incidents is critical, the impact of threats on student safety and academic achievement must be recognized.** Data from this report indicates that threats of violence as well as false reports of active shooters and simulated attacks are a frequent occurrence in schools, resulting

in a heightened level of anxiety and fear for school stakeholders. The task of assessing the validity of an ever-increasing number of threats, and responding appropriately and effectively to each one of them puts educators and emergency responders in a difficult position, often with little training or support in what to do. Even worse, the frequency and scope of threats consumes significant financial and personnel resources and almost always results in the loss of instructional time, negatively impacting academic achievement. Appropriate training, resources, and support need to be applied to preventing, assessing, and responding to threats of violence, not just actual incidents.

ESSN founders Dr. Amy Klinger and Amanda Klinger are the authors of *Keeping Students Safe Every Day: How to Prepare for and Respond to School Violence, Natural Disasters, and Other Hazards*, an education-focused resource that provides information, insights, and specific strategies to assist schools in preventing and responding to violent incidents and threats.

# Methodology

## Data Collection

Other than this series of reports, there are no publically accessible national data on current threats and incidents of violence in schools. The incident and threat statistics in this report are built on a data set that is a compilation of violent incidents and threats that have occurred in U.S. K-12 schools as reported from media sources.

Media reports of all violent incidents and threats in schools are reviewed by ESSN researchers and data are collected on the date, location, type of incident, type of school, how the threat or incident was delivered/discovered, and the response protocol enacted. Additional information such as perpetrator sex and age, and other specific or unusual findings are also incorporated when available. This means that while multiple media reports are used to verify and update the accuracy of information related to an incident or threat, if no information was released by the school or the incident/threat was never reported in any fashion, then it is not included in the data set. This data is confirmed and aggregated to arrive at the findings incorporated in annual and mid-year reports as well as periodic updates. Data collection for the 2018-2019 school year began August 1, 2018, including threats and incidents through June 30, 2019.

## Limitations

It is unlikely that all violent incidents and threats in schools have been included in the data set. In fact, it is possible that numerous incidents have not been reported, and therefore do not appear in the data set. The frequency of threats and incidents was so great that media reports often combined multiple threats and incidents together in a generic fashion, or did not provide specifics as to the circumstances. As a result, the number of

actual incidents and threats that occurred in the 2018-2019 is most likely depressed. Rather than undermining the findings, this potential "under-reporting" only seeks to emphasize the significance of the data found in the study.

Notes

For the purposes of this research, "violent incidents" and "threats of violence" are defined as those with the potential for loss of life, such as explosive devices, firearms, and other potentially lethal devices such as knives etc. Lower levels of school violence that typically enact only minor disciplinary consequences, such as fights, harassment etc. are not included. The omission of less-violent incidents is not to minimize their impact or importance, but rather reflects that they are not consistently reported and/or available to the general public.

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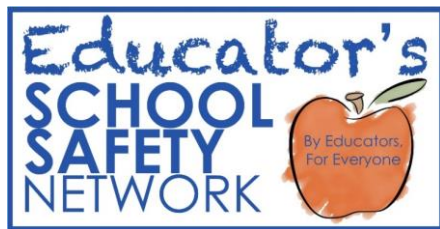


For the complete report, go to: www.eSchoolSafety.org/violence

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[i] Ropeik, D. (2018, March 25). School shootings are extraordinarily rare. Why is fear of them driving policy? Retrieved from https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/school-shootings-are-extraordinarily-rare-why-is-fear-of-them-driving-policy/2018/03/08/f4ead9f2-2247-11e8-94da-ebf9d112159c_story.html