

VIOLENT THREATS AND INCIDENTS IN SCHOOLS:

An Analysis of the 2022-2023 School Year



*Researched and written by Dr. Amy Klinger,
Amanda Klinger, Esq. and Hannah Klinger*

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For media inquiries, please contact
Amanda Klinger, Director of Programs
Amanda@eSchoolSafety.org.

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OVERVIEW AND SUMMARY

In the 3 years since the release of our last report on violent threats and incidents in schools, there have been seismic shifts in the political, cultural, and educational landscapes. The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, and the extensive, extended school closures that resulted from it, have had a massive impact on all school stakeholders, but most significantly on students. The social-emotional, academic, behavioral, and mental health challenges that have arisen in the wake of these unprecedented events can be seen in the data collected for this past school year related to violent threats and incidents.

As schools struggle to return to “normal” operations and deal with the aftermath of the pandemic, 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 2022-2023 school year. As the country returned to fully reopened schools in a more “typical” school year in the fall of 2022, The Educator’s School Safety Network (ESSN), a national non-profit school safety organization, returned to the work of compiling the most current information on threats and incidents of violence in America’s schools.

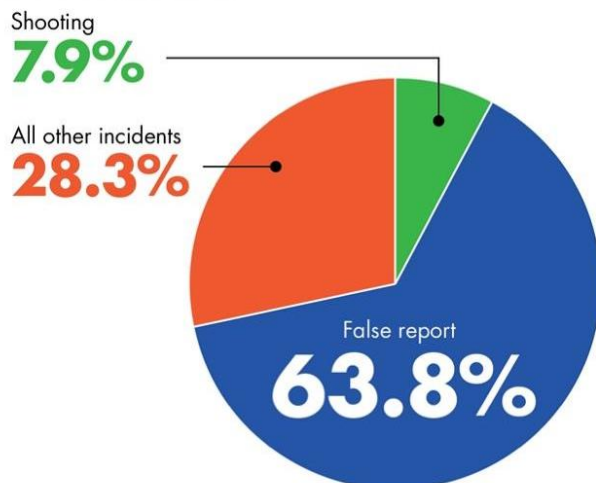
In addition to, or perhaps because of, the high levels of anxiety, fear, and chaos present as schools re-opened, incidents of false reports that began to emerge late in the 2018-2019 school year dominated the safety concerns of schools in the 2022-2023 school year. As noted in the key findings of this report, a staggering 63.8% of all violent incidents in schools this past year were responses related to false reports of an active shooter in the school (commonly called “swatting”).

KEY FINDINGS

1. The most frequent violent incident in the 2022-2023 school year was a false report of an active shooter (Swatting).

In the 2022-2023 school year, 63.8% of all violent incidents were false reports of an active shooter within the school (i.e. swatting) while 7.9% of all violent events were actual shootings at a school. It is critical to understand that these events, while ultimately determined to be false, necessitate an immediate, intensive response from both law enforcement and the school community. In other words, schools and law enforcement responded as though they were in a life or death situation. Only later was it determined there was no shooter, and that the incident was a false report. In the heat of the moment, students and staff believed and took action as if their lives were in jeopardy.

All incidents



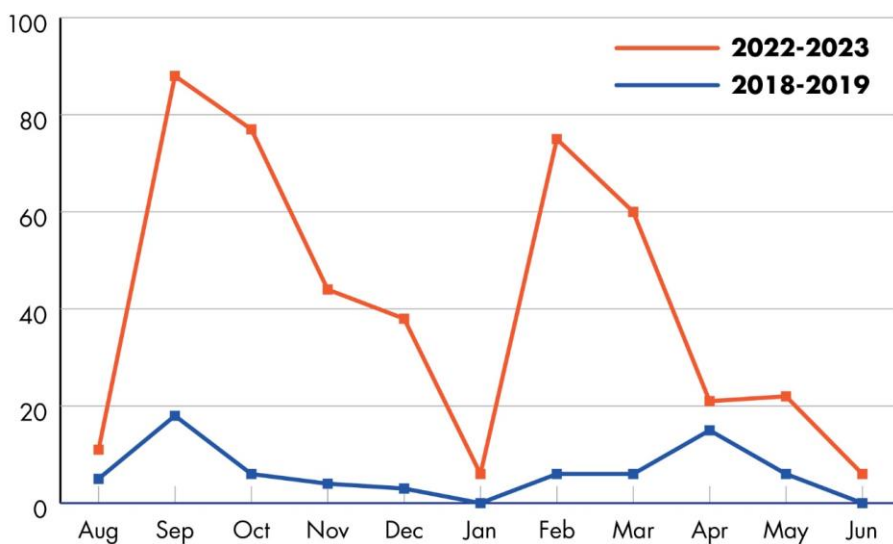
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Investigations and anecdotal evidence suggests that the majority of these false reports were deliberate attacks on a school. Numerous swatting events often took place simultaneously over

a targeted region, typically originating from individuals outside the school community.

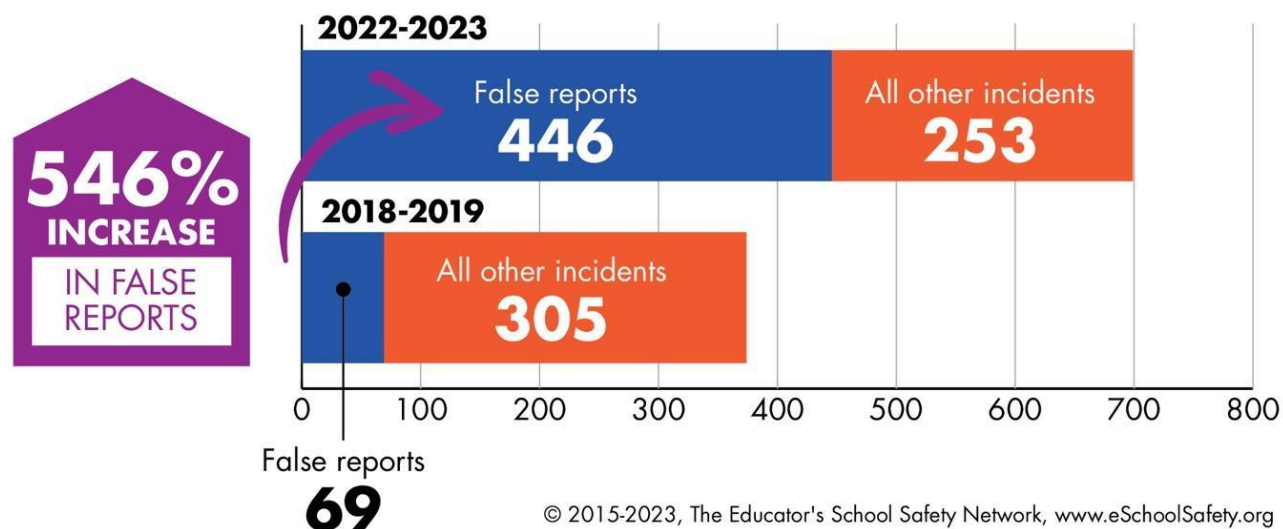
There were more than 446 false reports comprising 63.8% of all the violent incidents that took place in the 2022-2023 school year.

False report incidents by month



While false reports were the most common event in the 2018-2019 school year (with 69 incidents accounting for 18.4% of all incidents) this year's total of 446 events is a 546% increase from 2018-2019.

False reports as percentage of all incidents



Because of the frequency and scope of swatting incidents, media reporting tended to be consolidated by region or area, not by specific school district. As a result, it is highly likely that the actual number of schools impacted by swatting incidents is significantly higher than what can be reported here.

One compelling explanation as to why swatting or false reports were frequent and effective centers on the manner in which these attacks weaponize both perceptions and visceral fears related to violence in schools. The underlying belief that schools are unsafe, and the specific fear of an active shooter are rooted in the bitter reality that while rare, school shootings do occur in the United States with unacceptable frequency and devastating consequences.

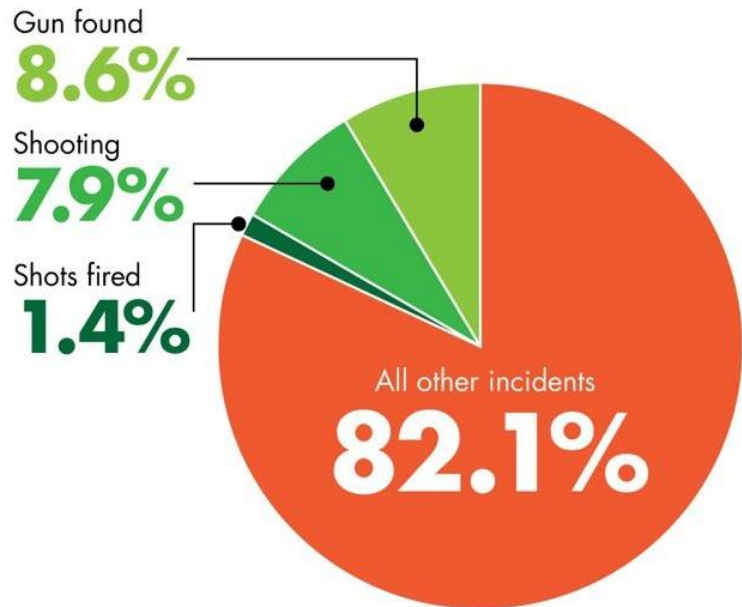
In our last report for the 2018-2019 school year, we reported that “Commonly held beliefs, parent and student fears, and the prevailing media narrative all say that the most likely threat a school faces is that of an active shooter. Although such events are horrific, data indicates these tragedies are exceedingly rare.” While this is still true in the 2022-2023 school year, unfortunately a false report of an active shooter that required an immediate, typically traumatizing response, is far and away the most common incident that schools had to face.

2. The presence and/or threat of gun-related violence continues to have a significant impact on schools.

While false reports were the most common incident schools faced, the presence and use of actual firearms on school campuses were the second and third most frequent events:

- The presence of a gun on campus comprised 8.6% of all incidents
- A shooting of some sort on campus comprised 7.9% of all incidents

Gun-related violence



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There were 55 shootings on a school campus, either during or after school hours, accounting for 7.9% of all violent incidents in 2022-2023. This is a 139% increase from the 2018-2019 school year when 23 shootings comprised 6.1% of all violent occurrences.

Because of the potentially out-sized impact of false reports or swatting on violent incidents, it is also important to examine gun-related violent incidents alone. When the false report incidents are removed from the calculations, the 125 incidents related to guns (shootings, shots fired, or gun found) comprised 49% of violent incidents (other than swatting) in 2022-2023. In 2018-2019 the 91 gun-related incidents (other than false reporting) accounted for 29% of all incidents. This is a 69% increase from 2018-2019 to 2022-2023.

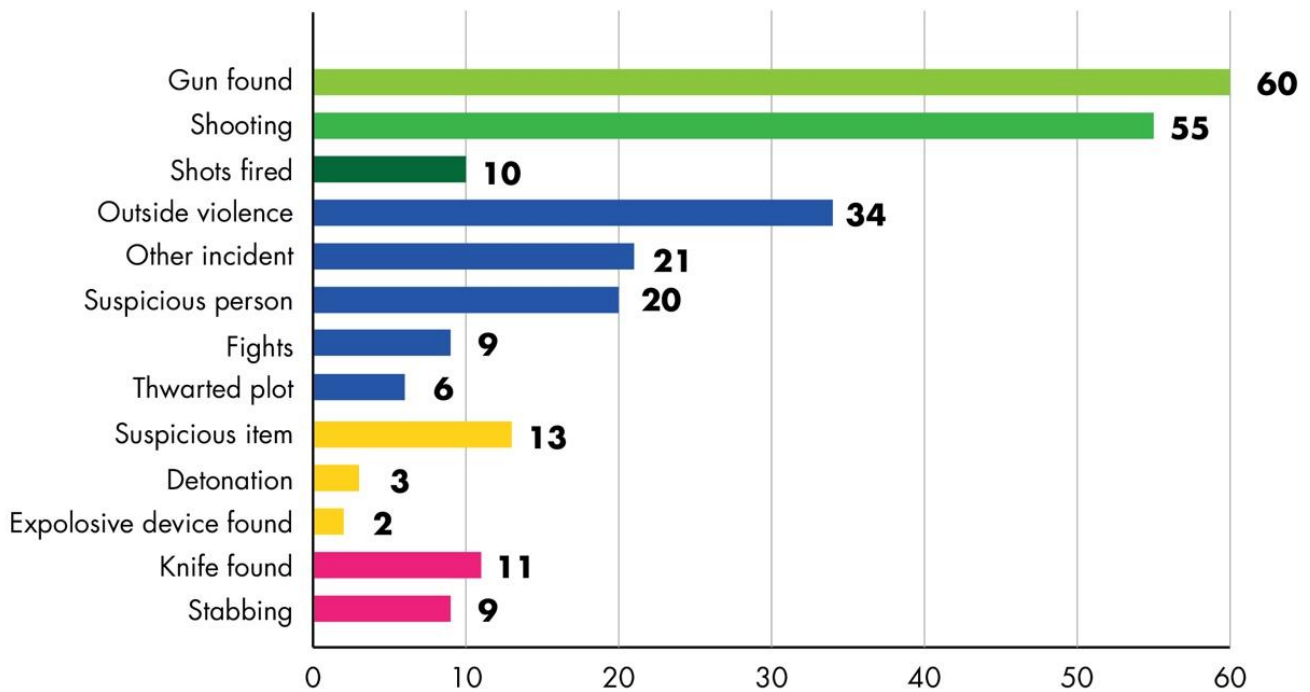
In other words, with or without false reports in the calculation, gun related incidents increased in the 2022-2023 school year and (after swatting) were the second most common incident schools experienced.

3. As in prior years, schools also faced an array of different types of violent incidents in the 2022-2023 school year.

The most common incidents tracked in the 2022-2023 school year involved the use, presence, or false report of the use of firearms. It is important to note, however, that violent and aggressive behavior, along with the use of weapons other than firearms, also impacted schools at rates similar to previous years.

As noted previously, it is highly likely that the frequency of and focus on swatting events resulted in under-reporting of other violent incidents which may have been deemed as less newsworthy.

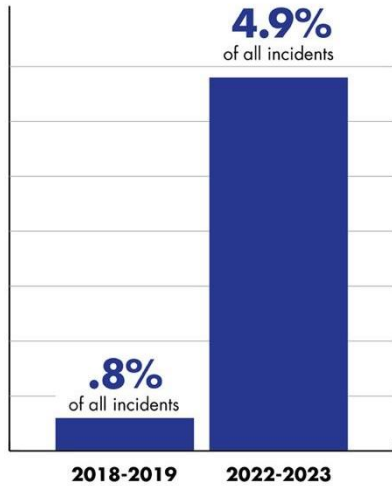
Incidents other than swatting



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One trend that bears watching is the increase in violence that originated outside of the school spilling over into, and impacting, the school campus. In 2018-2019, less than 1% of the violent incidents that occurred in a school were brought into the building or campus from an outside source. In 2022-2023, that rate increased to 4.9% of all the violent incidents.

Outside violence impacting schools



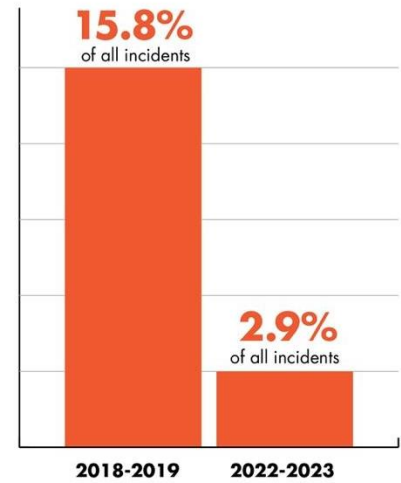
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violence coming into the school is certainly connected to an outside, unreported individual's ability to enter the school and commit violence.

At the same time, there was a significant decrease in incidents involving suspicious persons or intruders. In 2018-2019, 15.8% of all incidents involved a report of an intruder or suspicious person. In 2022-2023 that percentage dropped to 2.9%, an 81% decrease.

The decrease in reports of suspicious persons may be due to an actual decrease in the number of intruders, or because ineffective visitor screening and/or engagement simply failed to identify or stop them. The increase in outside

Intruder or suspicious person



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4. The findings of this report present particular challenges for schools moving into the 2023-2024 school year.

As school leaders prepare for the upcoming school year, they must also deal with the seemingly contradictory realities presented in this research:

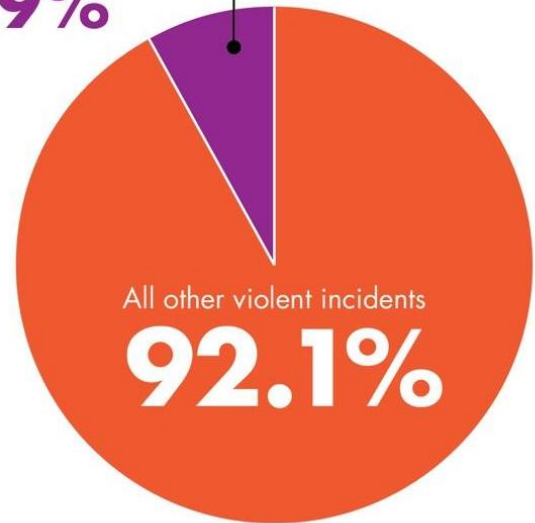
- The rate of incidents involving an actual school shooting is clearly unacceptable but comparatively speaking, is relatively low at 7.9% of all violent incidents in the 2022-2023 school year. In other words, 92% of the time schools were experiencing something other than an active shooter situation. This number refers only to man-made violent incidents and doesn't account for all of the other types of hazards not contemplated by this report such as the number of times schools experienced crisis events that were not violent in nature such as accidents, medical emergencies, or weather events.

- At the same time, schools are forced to respond as if there is an active shooter at an alarming rate, with false reports comprising 63.8% of all the violent incidents that occurred.

Active shooter

Active shooter

7.9%



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THE IMPACT OF SWATTING AND MITIGATION STRATEGIES

In reality it is quite likely that a school will experience an incident where an active shooter is reported and a response is required, but that the actual event is most likely to be a false report. The consequences of the intensive response required for a possible active shooter are significant:

- Trauma, anxiety, and fear resulting from stakeholders believing their lives are in jeopardy as they respond to an active shooter event (false or not).
- Conversely, the anxiety and fear created in the school community knowing that a report of an active shooter is likely/imminent.
- Consumption of resources (time, personnel, financial) both within the school and in the emergency response community.
- Creating or reinforcing misperceptions of how safe the school is, and an erosion of stakeholder trust in the institution itself.
- Increased "User fatigue" after multiple responses with the tendency to assume that the incident is "just another false report".

Whether the dramatic increase in swatting or false reports continues in the 2023-2024 remains to be seen. The current data indicates that schools should certainly be prepared in anticipation of a swatting attack.

Data from the 2022-2023 suggest that schools will continue to face increased violent incidents in the upcoming school year, both in the form of false reports as well as gun-related situations. In addition, incidents related to explosive devices, outside violence coming into the school, and other aggressive behaviors require effective prevention and response activities.

Now more than ever, a comprehensive, all hazards approach to violent incidents and threats is critical. Fortunately there is much that can be done:

1. Educators, not just law enforcement, must evaluate, improve, train, and practice school safety protocols in general - not just active shooter drills. Daily operational procedures such as supervision, accounting for students, relationship-building, access control and visitor screening must be critically examined and all staff members provided with adequate training, expectations, and accountability. Emergency response procedures and plans for evacuation,

parent reunification, crisis communications etc. should be evaluated and trained - not just lockdown.

2. Expand two way communication with stakeholders emphasizing the need to be prepared to respond to an array of potential crisis events, but also to build the awareness of the frequency of false reports.
3. Re-establish school safety and crisis response as a priority through staff professional development and daily operational practice that are focused on all hazards, not just active shooter response.
4. Re-build interpersonal relationships among stakeholders through communication, school culture initiatives, and community relations activities to provide an assurance of safety.

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. The lack of additional training or other “tools” makes a more measured response to a swatting event impossible.

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, especially given the high levels of mental health and social-emotional needs present in schools.

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 false reports on student safety and academic achievement must be recognized.

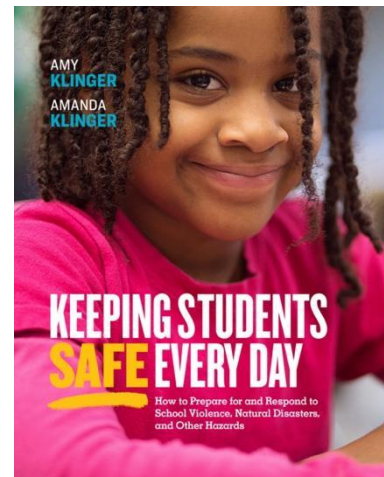
Data from this report indicates that false reports of active shooters are a frequent occurrence in schools, resulting in a heightened level of anxiety and fear for school stakeholders. The task of assessing the validity of an ever-increasing number of active shooter threats, and responding appropriately 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 swatting 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 false reports and swatting, not just actual shooting incidents.

CONCLUSIONS/SUMMARY

It is not possible to know the trajectory of violent incidents and threats in school during the “pandemic” school years of 2019 -2021. A comparable data set could not be created during those school years as most schools were disrupted with partial or full closings. Our past reports on violent incidents and threats historically have indicated a gradual increase from year to year. That was not the case when comparing critical elements of violent incidents in 2018-2019 to 2022-2023.

Despite a 4 year gap, the dramatic increases in false reports and gun-related violence has taken a toll on schools struggling to return to “normalcy”. These increases may also be a direct reflection of the skyrocketing rates of mental health issues and suppressed academic performance with which they coincide.

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

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 the media, 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 2022-2023 school year began August 1, 2022, including threats and incidents through June 30, 2023.

False reports or swatting events were categorized as incidents as they were an actual event or attack on a school that occurred at a specific day and time, rather than a potential, possible future incident (which is considered a threat).

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 (especially false reports) 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 2022-2023 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 such data is not consistently reported and/or available to the general public.

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This is the annual report for the 2022-2023 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 since 2014. Their research is derived from daily tracking and analysis of media reports 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, WIRED as well as numerous other national and international publications.



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

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