


Violent Threats and Incidents in Schools: An Analysis of the 2023-2024 School Year



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

For more information, training opportunities, or to download
the report, visit www.eSchoolSafety.org.

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

Violent Threats and Incidents in Schools:

An Analysis of the 2023–2024 School Year

Researched and written by [Dr. Amy Klinger](#), [Amanda Klinger, Esq.](#), and [Hannah Klinger](#)

This is the annual report for the 2023–2024 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

For media inquiries, please contact: info@eSchoolSafety.org

For additional information and training opportunities, go to:

www.eSchoolSafety.org

Overview and Summary **3**

Key Findings **3**

- 1. The number of threats in a given school year has decreased longitudinally, however the rate of violent incidents has increased during that same time period. 3
- 2. Violent incidents in schools appear to have declined from 2022–2023 to 2023–2024, however when false reports such as swatting are removed from the calculations, there is an actual increase of 49% in the number of violent incidents in 2023–2024 when compared to the previous year. 5
- 3. Gun violence remains a concern, however the majority of incidents that occur in a school continue to be not gun related. 6
- 4. The most commonly occurring incidents in 2023–2024 continue to increase over time. 7

Recommendations **8**

- 1. Training, resources, and emergency planning for schools needs to focus on an all-hazards approach to school safety. 8
- 2. The continued longitudinal increase in violent incidents indicates that current school safety practices alone are not effective. 8
- 3. While response to incidents is critical, the impact of false reports and bomb threats on student safety and academic achievement must be recognized. 9

Methodology **10**

- Data Collection 10
- Limitations 10
- Notes 11

OVERVIEW AND SUMMARY

As a national non-profit, the Educator's School Safety Network (ESSN) has gathered data on violent threats and incidents using the same methodology and analysis since 2016. After a multiple year hiatus during the Covid-19 pandemic when schools in the United States were not consistently in session, research in this area resumed in the 2022-2023 school year. This year's 2023-2024 data, establishes two years of post-pandemic research. ESSN's five school years of data and two years of post-pandemic research provides a unique opportunity to compare violent threats and incidents in schools both longitudinally over time, as well as before and after the pandemic itself.

The alarming trends noted in this report highlight the 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 in the 2023-2024 school year as well as in the recent past.

While there are several critical findings for the past school year as well as longitudinally, perhaps the most troubling is the clear indication that although threats of violence in schools fluctuate from year to year, the number of actual violent incidents that occur continues to be on the rise.

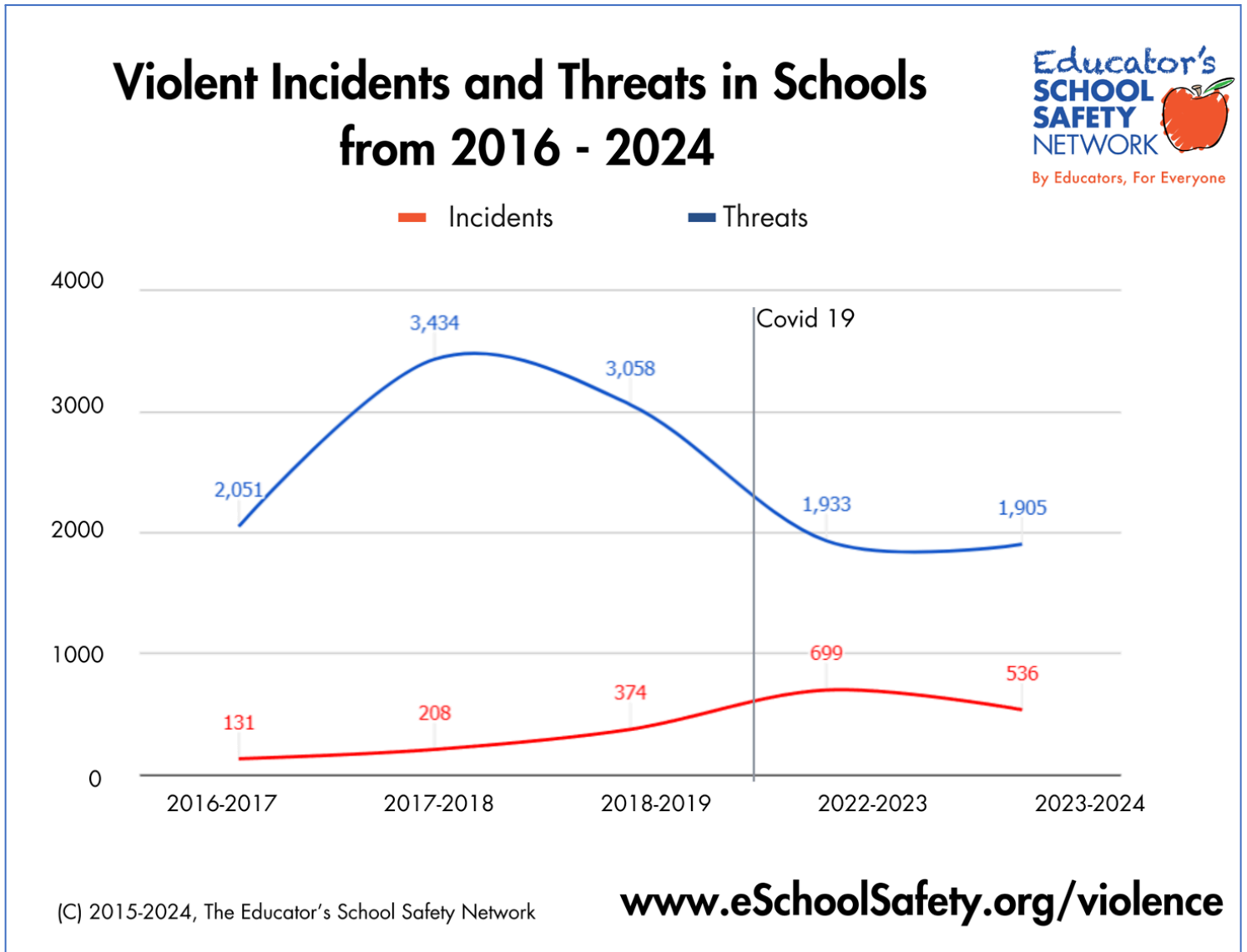
KEY FINDINGS

1. The number of threats in a given school year has decreased longitudinally, however the rate of violent incidents has increased during that same time period.

When comparing the five school years of data, the rate of threats of violence in 2023-2024 has returned to essentially the same number of threats as the first year of data collection (2016-2017) after several years of significant increases. There are a number of factors that may have contributed to this decline such as the implementation of more severe consequences for those making threats or improved investigation and response to the threats received.

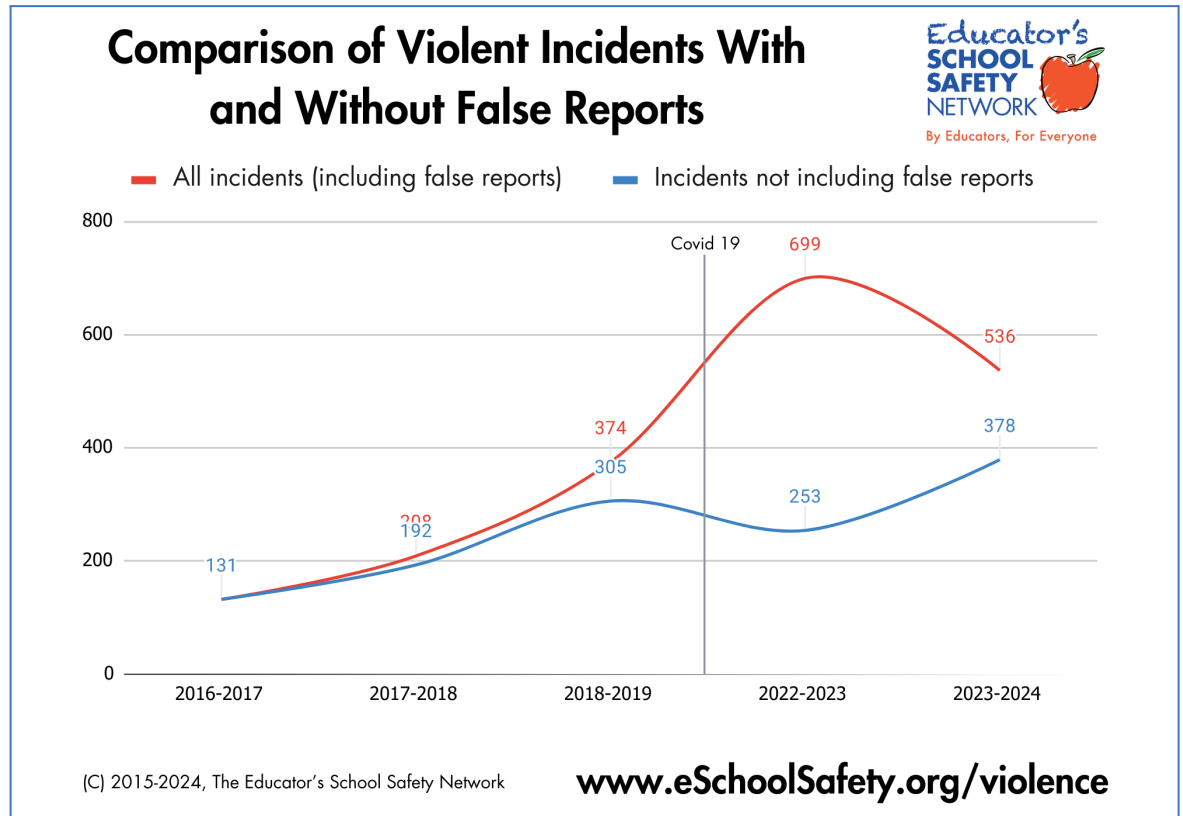
Unfortunately, it is much more likely that the number of threats received has not actually declined, but rather that threats are considered commonplace and therefore less likely to be reported in the media, which means they would not be included in the research totals.

Of greater concern is the longitudinal data related to actual violent incidents in schools. Over the course of the data collection period, **the number of violent incidents has increased more than 300% from the first year of data collection in 2016–2017 to the most recent school year 2023–2024.** Unlike threats, **actual incidents of violence have increased 83% when comparing pre and post pandemic school years.**



2. Violent incidents in schools appear to have declined from 2022–2023 to 2023–2024, however when false reports such as swatting are removed from the calculations, there is an actual increase of 49% in the number of violent incidents in 2023–2024 when compared to the previous year.

In 2022–2023 there were 699 violent incidents in schools compared to 536 incidents in the 2023–2024 school year, which is a 23% decrease. This is largely because of a significant decline in swatting or false reports of an active shooter from the previous year. In 2023–2024, there were 158 swatting incidents, down 64% from the 446 swatting incidents recorded in the 2022–2023 school year.

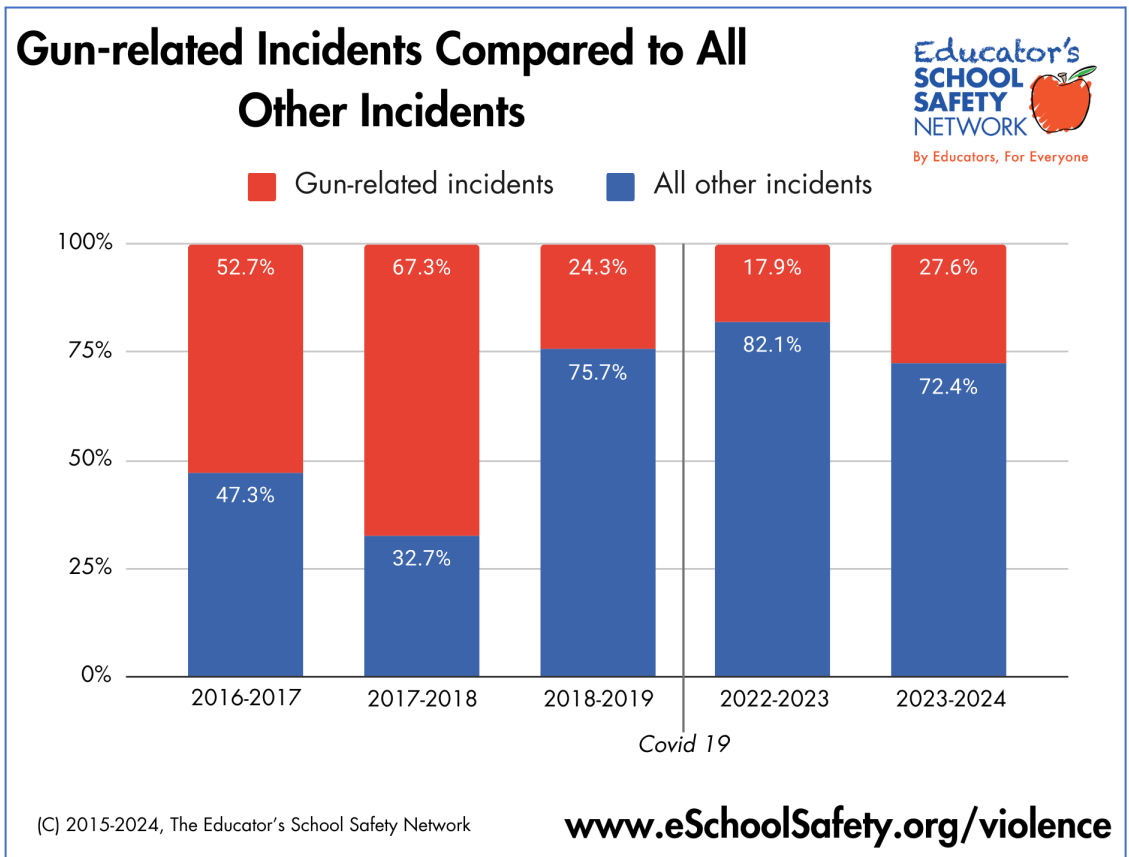


When swatting or false reports are removed from the incident totals, the comparison between 2022–2023 and 2023–2024 looks quite different. Violent incidents other than swatting increased 49% from the 2022–2023 to the 2023–2024 school year. **In other words, while swatting and false reports have dramatically decreased, the trend line over time indicates that violent incidents in schools continue to increase year to year at a significant rate.**

It is difficult to determine exactly why swatting incidents have decreased so rapidly. Factors such as increased prosecution of offenders along with more stringent penalties are certainly a factor.

3. Gun violence remains a concern, however the majority of incidents that occur in a school continue to be not gun related.

In the first two years of data collection, the majority of violent incidents were gun related - either a gun on campus, shots fired, or an actual shooting. Starting just before the pandemic in 2018-2019 and the two subsequent school years after, the vast majority of violent incidents experienced in schools did not in fact involve a gun in any fashion.



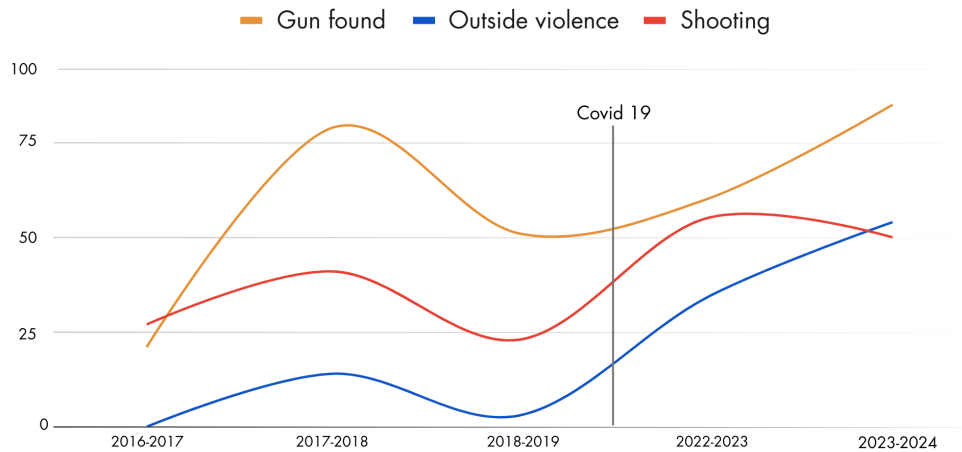
Schools faced a wide array of violence including false reports (29.5% of incidents), outside violence coming into the school (10% of incidents), possible explosive devices and detonations (6.7% of incidents), fights that required law enforcement intervention (6.5% of incidents), intruders in the school (5.6% of incidents) and knives found and/or stabbings (3.9% of incidents).

This reality illustrates the need for a more comprehensive, all hazards approach to school safety. The rate of incidents involving a shooting on school grounds is clearly unacceptable, but comparatively speaking, is relatively low at 9.3% of all violent incidents in the 2023-2024 school year. Nearly 92% of the time schools were experiencing something other than an active shooter situation, and 72.4% of the time the incident did not involve a gun in any fashion. It is also important to note that this number refers only to man-made violent incidents and doesn't account for the number of times schools experienced crisis events that were not violent in nature such as accidents, medical emergencies, or weather events.

4. The most commonly occurring incidents in 2023-2024 continue to increase over time.

In the 2023-2024 school year, the four most common incidents of violence were: (1) a false report of an active shooter, (2) a gun found on campus, (3) outside violence spilling into the school, and (4) a shooting in the school or on school grounds. While this ranking was nearly the same as the previous year, however, in some cases the rate of increase was significant. When examined over time, these four types of incidents have not always been the most common. In fact, the rate of outside violence coming into the school was barely measurable in the 2016-2017 school year, yet it has increased at a rapid rate during the past two school years.

Longitudinal Comparison of Most Common Incidents in the 2023-2024 School Year



(C) 2015-2024, The Educator's School Safety Network

www.eSchoolSafety.org/violence

| Incident Type | 2023-2024 School Year | | 2022-2023 School Year | | Change from 2022-2023 to 2023-2024 |
|---|-----------------------|----------------------|-----------------------|----------------------|--|
| | Ranking | Percent of incidents | Ranking | Percent of incidents | |
| False report of an active shooter | 1 | 29.5% | 1 | 63.8% | 54% decrease from previous year |
| Gun found on campus | 2 | 15.9% | 2 | 8.6% | 84% increase from previous year |
| Outside violence spilling into the school | 3 | 10.1% | 4 | 4.9% | 100% increase from previous year. |
| Shooting in the school or on school grounds | 4 | 9.3% | 3 | 7.9% | 17% increase from previous year. |

RECOMMENDATIONS

Longitudinal data as well as an analysis of the 2023–2024 school year suggests that schools will continue to face increased violent incidents in the upcoming school year, mostly in the form of false reports, gun-related situations, and violence from outside coming into the school. Although catastrophic events in schools may be rare, the potential for violence exists in all schools, every school day.

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.

The first critical step for improvement is to shift the thinking about school safety from an occasional concern or a fixation on an active shooter event, to an every day, all hazards approach 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.

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. The continued longitudinal increase in violent incidents 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 and bomb threats on student safety and academic achievement must be recognized.

Data from this report indicates that false reports of an active shooter and bomb threats 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 these threats and false reports, as well as 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 and bomb 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 false reports and bomb threats, not just actual shooting incidents.

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 2023-2024 school year began August 1, 2023, including threats and incidents through June 30, 2024.

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 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.

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 is often so great that in some circumstances media reports combine multiple threats and incidents (especially false reports) together in a generic fashion, or do not provide specifics as to the circumstances. As a result, the number of actual incidents and threats that occurred in post-pandemic school years 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.

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.