The Prevention of Gun Violence in Schools and Communities

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Written Statement

for the

Forum on School Safety

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House Committee on Education and the Workforce

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Good afternoon, Congressman Scott and distinguished Members of the Committee. I am Dr. Dewey Cornell, Professor of Education and a clinical psychologist at the University of Virginia. I want to thank you all for the opportunity to appear before you today. The shooting in Parkland was a terrible tragedy that arouses our deepest concern and sympathy. We must make our schools and communities safer and prevent further shootings.

I have studied youth violence for 34 years and as a forensic psychologist I have worked with many violent youth including several who have committed shootings at school. In 2001, I led the development of a threat assessment program for K-12 schools, the Virginia Student Threat Assessment Guidelines (VSTAG). We have conducted a series of controlled studies with hundreds of schools to show our model’s effectiveness and it is used in thousands of schools across the U.S. Currently, I direct an NIJ-funded project to study the statewide implementation of threat assessment in nearly 2,000 Virginia public schools.¹

The weekend after the Parkland shooting, an interdisciplinary group of 19 prevention researchers wrote a one-page, eight-point plan for gun violence prevention.² I helped to write this plan and will reference it in my remarks. I should point out that this plan has gained the endorsement of more than 240 organizations at national and state levels representing over 5 million educators, researchers, and mental health professionals.

Decisions about school safety should be based on a rational, factual analysis of the problem guided by evidence from scientific research. The evidence I will summarize today makes three main points.

1. **Violence in schools is just a small part of the larger problem of gun violence in our society.**

It would be a mistake to focus only on schools and miss the bigger picture. Children are exposed to violence in many other settings in their communities. Over the past 20 years, the United States has experienced an average of 22 students murdered at school each year.³ However, outside of schools, 1,480 students are murdered each year.⁴ In other words, students are 67 times more likely to be murdered outside of school than at school.

There is understandable public alarm that there have been approximately 300 school shootings since the Sandy Hook shooting in 2012.⁵ However, CDC reports⁶ tell us that that there have been over 500,000 shootings outside of schools in those 5 years, about 275 shootings⁷ *every day* resulting in approximately 92 deaths and 183 injuries. From this perspective, our schools are much safer than the surrounding community. We do not have a school violence problem, but a gun violence problem.

I realize that gun safety is not in the purview of this committee, so I will say only briefly that there is a credible body of scientific research that we can reduce gun violence with reasonable gun laws.⁸ The 8-point plan includes 3 gun safety recommendations: (1) a ban on assault-style weapons; (2) universal background checks; and (3) gun violence protection orders.

Schools are one of the safest places in a community. We have approximately 125,000 schools, so the average school can expect a student homicide every six thousand years.⁹ Our study of FBI
data found that homicides are ten times more likely to occur in a restaurant than a school.\textsuperscript{10} Anyone who thinks that arming teachers is a good way to protect our children should be advocating that we arm restaurant cooks and servers.

 Shootings are far more likely to occur in shopping centers and public parks than in schools, as every member of Congress must know. We cannot make every building, every shopping center, and every public park a fortress. Security is not enough. This leads me to my next point.

2. \textit{We need a more balanced approach that places greater emphasis on prevention.}

Our response to gun violence is often an emotional reaction of increasing security and preparing for the next shooting, rather than supporting efforts to prevent gun violence. We have already tried security measures and the available research says they are not very effective and that excessive security can be harmful.\textsuperscript{11} It has been reported that schools spent 5 billion dollars in security measures after the Sandy Hook shooting.\textsuperscript{12} Even if we spend 5 billion dollars more and could somehow make every school impregnable, that would only stop a small fraction of the shootings. For every shooting in a school, there are 1,600+ shootings outside of school.\textsuperscript{13} Why would we spend billions to stop one-tenth of one percent and ignore the 99.9% of gun violence?

We need a more balanced approach that includes a real emphasis on prevention. Prevention must start long before there is a gunman in the parking lot. It must start with helping all children to be successful in school.

Comprehensive prevention requires a three-tiered public health approach. For example, we cannot predict who will get cancer, but we know how to prevent cancer with a three-tier approach that includes (1) universal programs to promote health for everyone; (2) second level programs for reducing risk factors; and (3) third level interventions for individuals where illness is imminent.

Violence prevention must use a three-tiered approach, too. The first tier is universal programs for everyone, such as improving school climate so that all children can succeed in school. Many of the mass shootings in schools and communities are committed by individuals who developed anger and resentment because of the bullying, harassment, and discrimination they experienced at school.\textsuperscript{14} Schools should routinely measure and improve their school climate. We need school discipline reform so that students are helped to correct their behavior and be successful, rather than being driven out of school as part of the school-to-prison pipeline.

On the second tier, prevention means helping troubled young people who are at risk before they start down the pathway toward violence. Our schools are under-funded and under-staffed when it comes to special education, counseling, and mental health services. Put an armed guard in a school and you might prevent one shooting in one building. Put a counselor or psychologist in a school and you have the potential to help prevent shootings in any building anywhere in your community.

The third tier is to identify and intervene with students who are moving down a pathway toward violence. This brings me to my third and final point:
3. **Threat assessment is a safe and effective way to help students who have threatened violence.**

Threat assessment is a systematic process of evaluation and intervention for persons who have made verbal or behavioral threats of violence against others. Threat assessment was developed by law enforcement to protect public figures.\(^1^5\) It expanded to business and is widely used by corporations to prevent workplace violence. Twenty years ago, the FBI\(^1^6\) and Secret Service\(^1^7\) recommended that threat assessment be used in schools. After participating in the FBI study of school shootings in 1999, I became intrigued by the idea of adapting threat assessment for use in schools. My colleagues and I worked with a group of educators to develop a threat assessment model for schools. Over the past 17 years we have refined our model, published a detailed manual,\(^1^8\) disseminated it to thousands of schools, and conducted 11 studies of its effects.\(^1^9\)

We learned that threat assessment is a good prevention strategy, but that it must be adapted for schools. The traditional law enforcement approach to threat assessment is focused on assassins and terrorists, but we are working primarily with kids. Kids make threats frequently when they are angry, upset, or just trying to gain some attention. In our first study, we found that the age group that makes the most threats to kill are elementary school students.\(^2^0\) In almost all cases, students need counseling and discipline, not criminal charges. In school threat assessment, you must be careful not to over-react to student threats; the process must be calibrated to deal with kids, not adults.

There are some other important differences, too. In the business world, you fire an unhappy employee, but in schools we don’t want to fire our students, we want to educate them and help them become successful adults. We have long-term goals for our students, and none of our students are expendable. We want them all to succeed.

So, school threat assessment is different from other forms of threat assessment. The kind of threat assessment used to protect Members of Congress is not identical to threat assessment in schools. The kinds of threats are different, the environments are different, the goals are different, and the management strategies and interventions that can be undertaken are vastly different.

To be effective, threat assessment teams should use evidence–based practices, which means that they are supported by controlled studies. Controlled studies require the use of control groups and reliable measurement of treatment effects. Teams must be well-trained and they must adhere to high standards of practice. There should be continuous collection of data to measure quality and guide improvement. I will summarize some of our research findings.

In four studies\(^2^1\), we have found that fewer than 1% of students seen for a threat assessment carry out their threats. There have been fights, but none of the hundreds of threats to kill, shoot, or seriously injure someone were carried out. Furthermore, three controlled studies found that schools using threat assessment had less student aggression such as bullying and fighting.\(^2^2\)

An important concern is that threat assessment might increase the use exclusionary discipline (such as suspension and expulsion) and might disproportionately affect students of color. Because this is such an important concern, we have systematically and repeatedly examined the impact of threat assessment on the use of exclusionary school discipline and on racial/ethnic
disproportionality. Six controlled studies and two field test studies support the conclusion that schools using threat assessment see a decrease in use of school suspensions and use expulsions or arrests in about 1% of cases. We have also found in three studies that use of threat assessment does not have disproportionate effects on students of color and, to the contrary, reduces disproportionality.

In conclusion, we believe that prevention is a critically important component of school safety that has been overshadowed by the rush to increase security measures. Prevention should be comprehensive and multi-tiered. In order to reduce gun violence in our communities as well as our schools, we should improve our school climate and make mental health services more readily available to troubled youth. Schools should use a threat assessment approach that is well-designed to work in school settings. Threat assessment is valuable so that students are not stigmatized or punished for minor misbehavior. Threat assessment allows schools to identify students in need of mental health services and other support. In the small number of very serious threats, schools can recognize the danger, collaborate with law enforcement, and keep our schools safe. Let’s give prevention a chance.

I am happy to answer any questions that you may have.

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1 Dr. Cornell directs a project supported by Grant #NIJ 2014-CK-BX-0004 awarded by the National Institute of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice. The project is conducted in collaboration with the Center for School and Campus Safety at the Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Services. The opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the U.S. Department of Justice or the Center for School and Campus Safety at the Virginia Department of Criminal Justice Services.


4 FBI homicide statistics for the most recent 20-year period available (1996-2015) record 27,852 homicides of youth ages 5-18, which is an average of 1,393 per year. Source: Kaplan, Jacob. Uniform Crime Reporting Program Data: Supplementary Homicide Reports, 1976-2015. Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research [distributor], 2017-06-01. https://doi.org/10.3886/E100699V1

5 Everytown for Gun Safety reports 301 school shootings. https://everytownresearch.org/school-shootings/5955/ Although critics have contended that 301 is an exaggeration that includes incidents where no one was harmed, even this high figure is a small fraction of the total number of shootings outside of school by any standard.

6 There are approximately 33,727 shooting deaths and 66,728 shooting injuries on average per year according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (See Charts at end of this document). This makes an average total of 100,455 shootings in one year, 502,275 in five years. Deaths are recorded here: http://webappa.cdc.gov/sasweb/ncipc/dataRestriction_inj.html Shooting injuries are recorded here: http://webappa.cdc.gov/sasweb/ncipc/nfrates2001.html These statistics only include shootings that resulted in death or injury that was treated in a hospital. The comparison to school shootings would be even larger if the total number of shootings used the broader definition employed in counts of school shootings.

7 100,455 shootings per year is equivalent to approximately 275 shootings per day.

125,000 schools divided by 20 is 6,250. This is a conservative estimate, since some of the 20 homicides will occur in the same school. Also, secondary schools will have a higher rate than elementary schools. See Borum, R., Cornell, D., Modzeleski, W., & Jimerson, S.R. (2010). What can be done about school shootings? A review of the evidence. *Educational Researcher, 39*, 27-37. doi: 10.3102/0013189X09357620

Data from the FBI National Incident-Based Reporting System (NIBRS) analyzed in Nekvasil, Cornell, & Huang (2015). Prevalence and offense characteristics of multiple casualty homicides: Are schools at higher risk than other locations? *Psychology of Violence, 5*, 236-245.


Ratio of 301 school shootings to 502,245 shootings outside schools in five years is 1 to 1,668.


Studies available upon request. Email: youthvio@virginia.edu


http://psycnet.apa.org/record/2017-56103-001


21 Studies 1-2-3 used the VSTAG model. Study 4 was a statewide sample using both VSTAG and other models.


http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/spq0000220

22 These studies compared schools using VSTAG to schools not using threat assessment or using an alternative model of threat assessment.


23 Studies 1-2 are field test reports and 3-8 are controlled studies.


Studies 1-2 used the VSTAG model study 3 used a statewide sample of Virginia schools that included schools using VSTAG as well as other models.


Appendix

Call for Action to Prevent Gun Violence in the United States of America
Interdisciplinary Group on Preventing School and Community Violence
February 28, 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.

On the first level we need:
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.

On the second level we need:
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.

On the third level we need:
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.

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.
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Charts

CDC data are the most recent available. Over past 10 years, CDC reports an average of 32,575 deaths due to firearms. Breakdown is 62% suicide, 38% homicide, 1% unintentional. For 2013-2015, the average is 33,727.

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Source: National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, CDC
https://webappa.cdc.gov/cgi-bin/broker.exe
Over past 10 years, a total of 603,239 non-fatal injuries due to firearms, yielding an average of 60,324. For the past three years, the average is 66,728.

The sum of 66,728 injuries and 33,727 fatalities is 100,455 per year. Over five years the total is 502,275 shootings. With approximately 301 shootings in schools, the percentage of shootings in schools is $301 \div 502,275 = .000599$, which is less than one tenth of one percent. The ratio of shooting is 1,668 shootings outside of school for every 1 shooting in school.

Source: National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, CDC
https://webappa.cdc.gov/sasweb/ncipc/nfirates.html
Approximately 25 students are victims of homicide each year in the U.S.

Approximately 1,400 school-age children and youth are victims of homicide each year.
Schools have far fewer homicides than other locations.

Approximately 1% of students receiving a threat assessment in Virginia public schools are arrested or expelled.

No statistically significant differences in outcomes for Black, Hispanic, or White students receiving a threat assessment in Virginia public schools.