

---

# LET'S STOP TALKING ABOUT GUNS IN SCHOOL SHOOTINGS

---



*Here's What to  
Talk About  
Instead*

by **Linda Formichelli**

We need to stop talking about the guns used in school shootings.

Close to **1,000 school shootings** have taken place since the tragedy at Sandy Hook Elementary School in December 2012. Then, 2022 became the worst year on record; by late October, there were **257 shootings on school campuses**.

And after every shooting, the conversations that flood the internet look like this:

---

“Guns in the home are more likely to hurt a member of your household than to thwart evildoers. So could you please stop stockpiling weapons in your home...especially if you have kids? That would make it harder for bad guys to get their hands on them and shoot up schools.”

"Nah."

"OK, how about just not keeping semi-automatic weapons in your home? Surely you, as a private citizen, don't need weapons that are meant to kill as many people as possible in the shortest time possible?"

"Nah."

"OK, how about this instead? Three-quarters of school shooters **get their weapons** from the homes of their parents or a relative. So maybe you could just keep your weapons in a very secure location, so bad guys can't use them to murder dozens of children in the span of a few minutes?"



"Hmmm....nah."

Then the conversations die out — until the next shooting.

---

It's time to treat these people like the trolls they are, and kick them out of the conversation so we can try to solve this problem ourselves. Fortunately, **gun safety laws are gaining traction**, thanks to the activism of groups like Everytown for Gun Safety — but we don't have time to wait for the trickle-down effect.

Here, we'll talk about some of the solutions that *don't* require buy-in from Second Amendment zealots who are — unwittingly or not — supplying guns to school shooters.



I researched each idea — you'll see links to the studies and other research I cited — and then listed them roughly in order, from the least promising to the most.

I say *roughly* because every option has a complicated mix of pros and cons, and sometimes one solution overlaps with another in ways that can be difficult to tease apart.

But hopefully this will be a solid starting point for a productive discussion on how to help eradicate school violence — with the support we have right now.

---

## #8: USE TECH TOOLS TO THWART SHOOTERS

There's no shortage of tech tools that promise to identify potential shooters and ensure a faster emergency response. "If I'm intent on shooting people at a school, there are 20 ways to do it," said Erik Endress, CEO of the emergency-reporting app Share911, in an [AP News article](#). "We can improve the outcome of these situations. We can minimize the casualty count."

Let's unpack this.

1. How chilling is it that the goal here is not to eliminate shootings, but to "minimize the casualty count" when they inevitably happen?
2. Think about it for a second: If the apps really worked, the companies that sell them would put themselves out of business. These companies profit from our fear and pain, so they're not exactly incentivized to kill the golden goose that's killing our kids.
3. The onus is often on teachers — the underpaid, overworked, under-appreciated professionals who teach our kids — to install and use the technology.

Twitter user [@GoldenLassoGirl](#) is a teacher who live-tweeted the active-shooter app training her school provided to staff. Here are the juicy bits, edited for clarity:

- 
- “ They seem to think we know a lot more than we do. They have no real idea of how many things we do and handle each day. The fact that we haven't read their whole website before the training baffles them.
  - “ They suggest that you do not use the ‘call 911’ button in the app. It has some sort of issue and takes more time.
  - “ The school district isn't providing phones for us. Our employer is asking us to put an app on our phone that they control and that tracks our location using GPS. Off to a great start.
  - “ It isn't required, so there will be a ton of people who don't have it...which defeats the point. Substitute teachers won't have access. So whole classes of kids will be vulnerable because their sub has no way to know an alert went out.
  - “ In an emergency, we are supposed to use grid codes to communicate instead of saying room numbers and building names. The lines are INVISIBLE. How am I supposed to look at the huge play area and know which grid square something is in? How does the grid help with two story buildings? They seem a little baffled by this question.
  - “ Like half the teachers in the room haven't even been able to log in. A few of us are holding out on downloading it. All together about 30-40% of teachers are all set up on it. Education money well spent.

---

Ain't nobody – especially teachers – got time for complicated, intrusive, and downright inefficient apps.

Software developers are now working on more advanced tools that may help predict whether a kid is likely to turn into a shooter, which they hope will actually stop shootings before they start. For example, “[B]y compiling attacker profiles, machine learning could tell us that both Heath High School-shooter Michael Carneal and Sandy Hook-killer Adam Lanza were bullied in school,” reports *Fast Company*. “AI could then cross-reference this commonality with currently bullied students in order to pinpoint who might become a shooter in the future.”

Right now it looks like the proposed AI solution would merely replace the perfectly good eyes and ears of teachers, students, social workers, and counselors. And with AI being notorious for treating minorities ineptly, it's likely not a tool we want to use to preemptively label someone a potential shooter.

## #7: INSTALL METAL DETECTORS IN SCHOOLS

Metal detectors are supposed to help students and teachers feel safe, while sending a signal to bad guys that the school is well defended. As a bonus, we don't need to get buy-in from gun owners. They can store loaded weapons in their

---

unlocked cars as usual, because if someone steals them to go on a school shooting spree, they'll be stopped at the door by one of these miraculous machines.

This all sounds pretty good so far. But let's dive into the details before we commit to this solution.



School metal detectors cost anywhere from \$4,000 to \$30,000 each. I'm sure you'll agree that no amount of money is too

much to spend to save a student's life. However, the tools we're spending all this money on *have to work*. And all too often, they don't.

“Often, school personnel lack the necessary training in how to correctly use metal detectors,” reports [WestEd Justice & Prevention Research Center](#). “In some cases, metal detectors have been found to be run in ways that are not in accordance with industry standards. In other cases, they have been operated even while known to be broken, or students have been allowed to pass through metal detectors that have been turned off completely.”

In one situation, a student shot the detector operator and then walked right through it with three guns, going on to kill multiple people inside the school.

---

Not only that, a [study in \*Campus Safety\* magazine](#) revealed that in New York City schools, 57% of the weapons they confiscated in a single school year were discovered *without* using scanning devices.

As for the idea that metal detectors help kids feel safe: In reality, they create a prison-like environment that disproportionately affects non-white students. [According to WNYC Data News](#), 48% of Black high school students and 38% of Hispanic high school students in New York City have gone through metal detectors at school — as opposed to just 14% of white students. That's because these machines are typically installed in schools with the most minority students.

Seeing as how metal detectors are can be faulty, are often run by poorly trained staff, don't detect as many weapons as manual methods, and create a negative environment for minority students...why break the budget on them?

## #6: HIRE ARMED GUARDS

When you're protecting something precious, you hire guards. Celebrities have bodyguards, and even your payroll is protected by armored cars staffed with guards.

This solution allows people to store loaded guns next to the bowls of Halloween candy on their front steps — because anyone who tries to bring one of them to school will find themselves looking down the barrel of *another* gun!



---

But despite how cool it might look to have gun-packing badasses at each door, the most recent research indicates that armed guards and SROs do not keep kids safer. In fact, in 2021 the *Journal of the Medical Association* reported that their presence actually *increases* deaths. These armed employees can also have a detrimental effect on minority students, *says the Brookings Institute*.

I enjoy seeing the smiling face of the SRO in my son's middle school, and it's clear how much the students like him. I just don't think it's a good idea to invest in more of them, or to flank every door in the school district with armed guards. It's an expensive, ineffective, and discriminatory strategy.

## #5: CRACK DOWN ON BULLYING

In its report "Protecting America's Schools: A U.S. Secret Service Analysis of Targeted School Violence," *the Secret Service says*, "Most attackers were victims of bullying, which was often observed by others: Most of the attackers were bullied by their classmates, and for over half of the attackers the bullying appeared to be of a persistent pattern which lasted for weeks, months, or years."

It seems to make sense, then, to implement a zero-tolerance bullying policy. No bullying = no angry victims seeking

---

revenge = no shootings. And no need for pesky gun security at home.

Sadly, however, zero-tolerance bullying policies can hurt more than they help, [according to Verywell Family](#). Among other issues, they discriminate against students with special needs, take autonomy away from the teachers, and punish victims for fighting back

And...do they even work?



When my son was in elementary school, the procedure whenever somebody was bullied was to gather all the kids into a circle, explain how important it is to be kind, and write nice notes about one another.

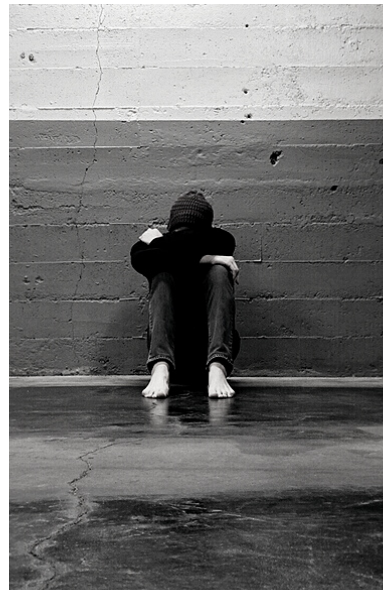
The percentage of students who leave one of these circles thinking, “Wow...I now realize it’s better to be kind than to mercilessly mock another kid for being adopted” probably hovers close to zero.

And this was elementary school. Once a kid hits *middle school*, all bets are off.

---

Middle-school shaming has existed since the dawn of homeroom. The pool of offenses for which you can be bullied is vast and deep. If you're *good* at art, you're bullied for being gay. If you're *bad* at art, you're bullied for being bad at art. Play sports or participate in cheerleading? You're stupid. A girly-girl? You're a slut...though if you're *not* ultra feminine, you're ugly. If you're fat or trans – or, God forbid, both – it's open season on you.

No matter how seemingly impervious to bullying a kid may be, someone will figure out their weak spots and delight in poking them. Surprisingly, three of the top ten traits of kids who attract bullies, [according to Verywell Family](#), are “successful,” “intelligent,” and “popular.”



But let's say you could magically eradicate bullying from schools.

You still can't stop kids from *feeling* bullied. An always-on sense of shame seems to be part of the teenage psyche, and you can't control how a student will feel when someone sends them a text with two dots at the end instead of three.

---

## #4: PUT LESS FOCUS ON BULLIES AND MORE ON THE BULLIED

I'm not saying that teachers, parents, and students shouldn't push back against bullying — we absolutely should. My point is that *it makes better sense to focus more on helping the victims than on stopping the bullies*. Relying on haters to stop hating is like relying on irresponsible gun owners to take responsibility for their weapons. I wouldn't want to bet my kid's life on it.

Even if zero tolerance policies don't have enough of an effect on bullies themselves, they may help the victims feel seen and heard. Some teachers report that kids do feel more positive after receiving a complimentary note as part of a school anti-bullying project.

Another reason to make the victims of bullying the priority: Research has shown that some kids are naturally “bully magnets.” **Two studies show** that kids who experience bullying often have problems with nonverbal communication, such as reading nonverbal cues or understanding their social meaning.

Kids who are depressed have more trouble getting along with their peers, as well. “Kids who cry easily, express negative emotions, and show other signs of depression ultimately suffer socially because they are shunned by their peers and attract the attention of bullies,” **according to an article on Health.com**.

---

Bullying can also cause victims' growing brains become stuck in the "freeze" part of the flight/fight/freeze process in a self-reinforcing cycle; their brains start to consider *everything* a threat, even if it isn't, giving these kids that "victim" vibe that causes other students to turn on them like hyenas on a wounded zebra.

Helping these students shore up their confidence, learn to understand social cues, and get along with their fellow students is a great start in preventing school violence.

## #3: OFFER MENTAL HEALTH COUNSELING TO KIDS WHO ARE SUFFERING

Above, we learned that depressed kids tend to be targets of bullying. However, the idea that mass shooters are always (or even usually) mentally ill is false.

"The public tends to link serious mental illnesses, like schizophrenia or psychotic disorders, with violence and mass shootings," reports the [Columbia University Department of Psychiatry](#). "But serious mental illness — specifically psychosis — is not a key factor in most mass shootings or other types of mass murder. Approximately 5% of mass shootings are related to severe mental illness. And although a much larger number of mass shootings (about 25%) are

---

associated with non-psychotic psychiatric or neurological illnesses, including depression, and an estimated 23% with substance use, in most cases these conditions are incidental.”



The operative word here is “incidental”; many, many people struggle with anxiety, depression, and other non-psychotic mental health disorders, so it only makes sense that some shooters would struggle with them as well.

What about when these mental disorders are combined with negative life events? **The Secret Service** research on school shootings shows that “Nearly every attacker experienced negative home life factors.”

The solution, then, is obvious: Bring every U.S. citizen to a state of 100% perfect mental health, and then eradicate all challenges and negative events from everyone’s life. Ensure

---

that no one gets dumped. No one's parents get divorced. No one is neglected. No one loses their job. (And everyone gets to keep their guns wherever they want!)

We should of course offer mental health help to those who need it, and work to improve students' home life when necessary. But it's not a panacea that will eradicate school violence.

## #2: CHANGE UP THE ACTIVE-SHOOTER DRILLS IN SCHOOLS

Schools vary in their active-shooter drill practices. For example, *Education Week reports* that “The drills most supported by research are simple lockdown procedures during which students lock classroom doors, shut off lights, stand out of view from any windows, and stay silent.”

Because, I guess, a rampaging shooter would *never* think a classroom with the lights off is actually occupied...and bullets can't go through walls and doors.

Other experts recommend training students and teachers to distract shooters by pelting them with books and other objects. Expecting a classroom full of five-year-olds to snap to orders and act in unison like a well-trained battalion...while being shot at? Sounds reasonable.

---

Not to mention, these drills reveal information about school security and safety policies that can be used by current or former students who may be planning an attack. These potential shooters know exactly where people would be hiding, whether and how they barricade the doors, and more.

But the biggest issue with all these policies – according to threat management and personal safety expert Spencer Coursen in his book *The Safety Trap* – is that they're based on *locking kids inside the building with the threat*.

Would you hide from a fire inside a building? No? Then why would you hide from a shooter in the building...inside the building?



The better option is to tell kids to run, not to hide in predictable, convenient, shootable clumps. This wouldn't be an easy solution – but no solutions to this problem are easy, so we may as well implement the one that turns kids into difficult-to-hit moving targets instead of sitting ducks, while putting as much distance between the students and the threat as possible.

A major problem with this policy, a school board member tells me, is that it would open schools up to liability. Schools need to know where every student is at all times – and if you



---

encourage kids to scatter in random directions, by definition you won't know where they are. This is why schools opt to cram kids inside the building while an active shooter stalks the halls looking for kids crammed inside the building.

This idea might still work, though, if schools and families designate local safe havens their students can run to. Restaurants, for example, are good safe havens because they offer food, phones, and bathrooms, according to *The Safety Trap*. Gas stations, stores, libraries, police stations, and fire stations are other possibilities. Kids who walk to school can even run home – and bring others with them.



Think it's crazy to expect some students to lead others to a safe place? Well, it's less crazy than expecting them to distract an active shooter by lobbing books at his head while he mows down their classmates.

This strategy lets gun owners continue to keep weapons on their credenzas in case a suspicious-looking delivery guy shows up on their Ring camera – while giving kids a fighting chance if someone steals those weapons to carry out a revenge plot on their school.

---

# #1: HIRE (WAY) MORE SCHOOL SOCIAL WORKERS

We've already seen that the kids who perpetrate school shootings are hurting. They're likely to have been bullied, they may be dealing with a negative or dangerous home life, and they could be depressed or anxious.

The problem is that other people can see the patterns, but *no one speaks up about them*. In fact, in the Secret Service report, a key piece of information was that the bullying that shooters experienced was "often observed by others."

Kids don't suddenly "snap" and go on a shooting spree. They offer clues well beforehand, such as showing an interest in violent topics and levying threats against others. They also plan their attacks, sometimes far in advance...and they aren't quiet about it. According to *The Safety Trap*, "87% of kids exhibited clear signs of leakage prior to shooting" and "78% revealed their attack plans to others/shared on social media."

This offers a large window of opportunity when a shooting might be prevented, if only the right people knew about it. Hence the social workers.

School social workers work in conjunction with school counselors and psychologists "to help eliminate barriers that prevent a student from being academically successful," *says the*

---

## National Association of Social Workers (NASW).

Social workers offer guidance in social-emotional learning, make home visits to address problems in the household, and connect students and their families with the resources they need to pull out of crises and succeed. They're also trained to work with vulnerable kids such as LGBTQ students, homeless students, and students with disabilities.

Social workers address the broader school culture, and are often the first responders who are contacted during a crisis.

NASW and the School Social Work Association of America recommend that school systems employ one school social worker per 250 students — but right now there's only about one social worker per 2,100



students. That's less than one tenth of the recommended number.

Perhaps this is where safety budgets should be going, instead of using our resources to load up schools with armed guards, shiny machines, and ineffective tech tools that *look* impressive — but have significant downsides.

---

# A CONVERSATION ABOUT GUN VIOLENCE...WITHOUT THE GUNS

Once we face the fact that irresponsible gun owners are disrupting productive conversations about school shootings – by keeping us busy responding to their deflections, pointless arguments, and faulty logic – we open up bandwidth to consider solutions that don't require their input.

It would be nice if we *did* have their buy-in, of course, because it would keep guns out of the hands of potential shooters, and give everyone more time to examine and fix the root causes of school violence.

But we don't have it yet, so we need to give up our fantasies of winning these people over and go forward without them. It may feel like giving up, but I prefer to call it *being practical* – and doing the best we can with what we have so we can keep our kids safer.