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School Safety and Target Hardening

The May 2022 deaths of 19 students and two teachers in a mass shooting at Robb Elementary School in Uvalde, TX, has led some Members of Congress to discuss a range of policy options to address gun violence in schools, several of which have been considered after previous mass shootings in schools. One option that has again gained the attention of policymakers is *target hardening* of schools, which generally involves attempts to fortify schools against gun violence through their physical design and additional security measures.

Data on Shootings on School Grounds

Shootings on school grounds are relatively rare events, though data from the Center for Homeland Defense and Security (CHDS) at the Naval Postgraduate School suggest that these events have occurred more frequently in recent years. CHDS publishes data on the number of school shootings (defined as “each and every instance a gun is brandished, is fired, or a bullet hits school property for any reason, regardless of the number of victims, time of day, or day of week”) each year from 1970 to 2022. From 1970 to 2017, there were two years (2006 and 2017) during which more than 50 school shootings occurred. From 2018 to 2022, there were more than 100 school shootings each year. Despite the increase in shootings on school grounds in recent years, most do not involve an active shooter (i.e., when a shooter killed and/or wounded victims, either targeted or random, within the school campus during a continuous episode of violence). Since data collection began, 2018 was the year with the most active school shooter incidents (11). Active shooter incidents in 2018 accounted for 9% of all school shootings (118) and 57% of all school shooting deaths that year.

NIJ’s Comprehensive School Safety Framework

The National Institute of Justice (NIJ) released a comprehensive school safety framework in 2020. The framework has three interconnected components: physical safety, school climate, and student behavior. NIJ notes, “school climate and physical safety are central to preventing school violence. Managing student behavior contributes to a positive school climate, which can prevent threats to students’ physical safety.” NIJ asserts there is not a one-size-fits-all approach to school safety and that each school has to develop its own approach based on its assessment of needs and risks.

Physical Safety

This component is broadly about ensuring students’ physical safety at schools and pertains to school architecture, controlling ingress and egress, and preventing bodily harm to students and teachers. NIJ states that the keys to keeping students safe through physical security

measures include (1) having an emergency operations plan (EOP), (2) being aware of and receiving training on the EOP, (3) having mechanisms in place for threat assessment, (4) consistently using safety technology (e.g., controlled entries, surveillance cameras) that is appropriate for the issues the school faces, (5) designing schools that utilize Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design principles (i.e., designing spaces so they provide informal and formal means of access control, surveillance and the ability to be aware of one’s entire surroundings, and creating a sense of shared ownership and responsibility for a space), and (6) utilizing school resource officers (SROs).

School Climate

This component refers to the feelings people have about the school setting and includes factors such as conditions for learning and that support physical and emotional safety, connection and support, and engagement. NIJ explains that a positive school climate is important for school safety. According to NIJ, there is strong evidence that a positive school climate helps keep students safe and promotes other desirable student and school outcomes. A school’s environment influences student behavior, may affect students’ mental health and help-seeking behavior, improves school attendance, and creates an atmosphere where students are willing to report threats of violence or other negative behavior.

Student Behavior

This component encompasses students’ mental health, behavioral health, trauma, and discipline. NIJ notes that unaddressed mental health problems and adverse childhood experiences are connected to negative outcomes, such as poor academic achievement, behavior problems, dropping out of school, and delinquency.

School Resource Officers

SROs are sworn law enforcement officers who are assigned to work at a school. Assigning SROs to schools is a frequently discussed option for making schools harder targets because the SRO might serve as a deterrent to a potential school shooter, or provide a quicker law enforcement response in cases where a school shooting occurs. While there are proponents of placing more SROs in schools to protect against school shootings, there is a debate about whether their presence is potentially detrimental to some children. Advocacy organizations, such as the American Civil Liberties Union, and academics have argued that SROs might result in more children either being suspended or expelled or entering the criminal justice system for relatively minor offenses. During the recent debate over policing in the United States, numerous school districts across the country re-evaluated their SRO programs, with some reducing budgets for SROs or

removing them from schools altogether and placing more funding into mental health services for students. However, some jurisdictions that decided to scale back the number of or remove SROs have recently changed course and increased or restarted their programs after concerns over an increase in safety problems in some schools.

NIJ contends that SROs can be a key component in promoting safety in and around schools. NIJ also notes that “there are mixed findings regarding the impact of officers in schools. For example, some scholars have found that school policing can contribute to increased involvement of youth in the justice system, while others suggest that school policing yields positive outcomes such as crime prevention, staff and student safety education, and improved police-student relationships. These mixed results can be attributed to the limited evidence base surrounding the impact of law enforcement in educational settings.”

There are instances where school shootings have occurred at schools where SROs were present (e.g., Parkland, FL; Santa Fe, TX; Marshall County, KY; and Great Mills, MD), which might raise questions about their deterrent effects. On the other hand, data on instances of averted instances of school violence from 2018 to 2020 collected by the National Policing Institute, a nonprofit research and policy organization focused on policing issues, indicated that there were five cases (out of 120 in total) where an SRO discovered a school violence plot before it was committed. A 2021 study from researchers at the University at Albany, State University of New York and the RAND Corporation used data from the Department of Education’s Civil Rights Data Collection to examine the effects of SROs on school crime and climate. Their results were consistent with NIJ’s conclusions about the mixed results regarding SROs’ effects on schools and students, but they also found that SROs did not prevent school shootings.

If a school district chooses to have SROs on campus, NIJ stresses that their duties, roles, and responsibilities should be clearly delineated and SROs should not be involved in resolving routine disciplinary incidents in schools, such as disruptive students in class.

Physical Security in Schools

In the wake of a school mass shooting, there are frequently calls to make schools harder targets for active shooters by increasing physical security measures. A review of school safety technology conducted in 2016 by Johns Hopkins University’s Applied Physics Laboratory (APL) found that “many of the activities that schools undertake to promote safety and prevent problems, including use of technology, have not been evaluated” and that “there is limited and conflicting evidence in the literature on the short- and long-term effectiveness of school safety technology.” APL also noted that the school safety technology literature tends to focus on people’s perceptions of school safety technology rather than the technology’s efficacy.

A 2019 meta-analysis of 693 studies on school violence found that traditional target hardening practices, such as installing security cameras and metal detectors, or having a SRO or school security guard present, had little association

with any form of violence or victimization at school. The study found that other factors, such as prior victimization, low social competence, peer rejection, violent school contexts, and negative school climates were the most consistent predictors of any at-school victimizations.

Department of Justice Funding for Target Hardening in Schools

DOJ administers two discretionary grant programs that are the primary source of federal funding for target hardening measures.

Grants under the Matching Grant Programs for School Security (school security grant program) are jointly administered by the Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA) and the Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS) Office. BJA and the COPS Office award grants for different purposes (see 34 U.S.C. §10551). Grants from the COPS Office focus more on traditional target hardening measures, while grants from BJA focus more on threat assessment and preventing school violence.

The COPS Hiring Program (CHP) provides grants that can be used to hire SROs. The COPS Office requires SROs hired with grant funds to attend a 40-hour training program from a provider it has approved.

Policy Considerations

NIJ’s school safety framework suggests that typical target hardening measures can contribute to school safety, but they are not, in and of themselves, sufficient to ensure school safety. Policymakers seeking to increase federal funding available solely for target hardening may consider whether to amend the authorization for the school security grant program so that funds can only be used for security measures, such as physical security and SROs. Congress could consider requiring a certain portion of annual funding for CHP to be dedicated to grants for hiring SROs.

NIJ’s framework suggests a more holistic approach to school safety, something Congress could support through the existing school security grant program. As currently structured, applicants have to submit two separate grant proposals depending on what programs they want funded. One issue policymakers might consider is whether allowing applicants to submit one proposal to one administrator for all of the purposes currently authorized under the school security grant program might promote more comprehensive school safety planning.

The aftermath of high-profile mass school shootings can lead to efforts to increase federal funding for school safety and security, but the funds can have a short spending window. APL noted that this can hamper the ability of school districts to evaluate their security needs and can lead to equipment purchases to show they are “doing something.” One issue policymakers might consider is whether Congress should make a long-term commitment to funding school safety infrastructure, possibly by establishing a mandatory program to fund these projects.

Nathan James, Analyst in Crime Policy

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