VIOLENT THREATS AND INCIDENTS IN SCHOOLS:
An Analysis of the 2017-2018 School Year

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In the spring of 2018, school safety was once again, tragically thrust into the national spotlight. Now, more than ever, there is a need to move beyond the noise of speculation and agendas to a data-driven understanding of the frequency, scope and severity of violent threats and incidents in U.S. schools.

The Educator's School Safety Network (ESSN), a non-profit organization dedicated to providing school safety training and resources, has compiled the most current, complete and accurate database of school-based violent incidents and threats. This final report, a summary and analysis of that database, shows a shocking increase from the previous school year, both before and in the wake of the tragedy in Parkland, FL.

A Mid-year summary of this work was on the front page of *USA Today*, and featured in *The New York Times, Washington Post, LA Times, NPR, BBC News, Newsweek* and numerous other national and international publications.

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

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Overview and Summary

On February 14, 2018, the shooting at Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland Florida became the spark that once again ignited a national conversation about violence in schools. Amid the political agendas, recriminations, activism, and just plain fear, a critical element has been overlooked - the 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 past academic year. This report provides insights and a critical analysis of the 2017-2018 school year.

The Educator's School Safety Network (ESSN), a national non-profit school safety organization, has compiled the most current information on threats and incidents of violence in America's schools to examine the frequency, scope, and severity of the problem.

In the 2017-2018 school year, more than 3,659 threats and incidents of violence occurred in American K-12 schools.

Perhaps the most concerning figures are the significant increases in threats and incidents from school year to school year. There were at least **3,380 threats** recorded in the 2017-2018 school year, **a 62% increase** from 2,085 threats in the 2016-2017 school year.

62% INCREASE

2,085
2016-2017

3,380
2017-2018
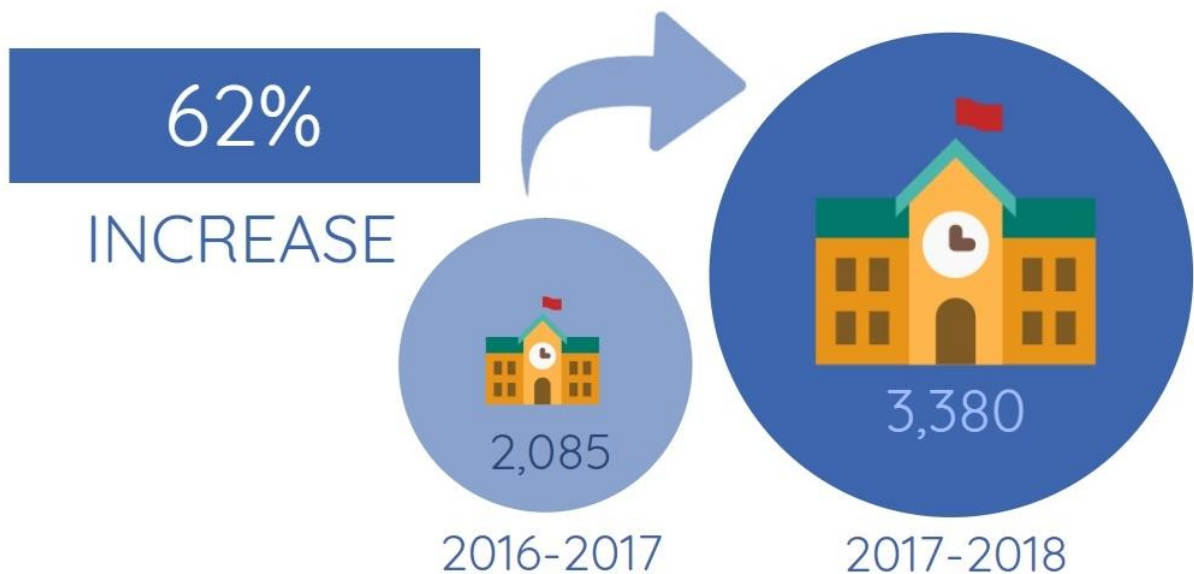
The increase in actual incidents is even more alarming. This past school year included at least **279 incidents of violence** compared to 131 events in the 2016-2017 school year – **an increase of 113%.**

Concurrent with these troubling findings, school administrators and law enforcement officials find themselves in the untenable position of having to make critical decisions about the validity of threats with little to no threat assessment protocols, few established best practices, outdated procedures, and typically, a complete lack of education-based school safety training. In the wake of the Parkland shooting, gun related issues and law enforcement solutions have become the central focus to the exclusion of a comprehensive, all-hazards approach to **both** violence prevention **and** response.

**The full report has two important purposes**:

1. To provide school stakeholders with the most current data and analysis available on the rate, frequency, severity, scope, and nature of violent threats and violent incidents in United States schools.

2. To provide school and law enforcement responders with an overview and understanding of the critical trends and warning signs that have emerged from an analysis of recent threats and incidents.

Summary of Findings

There were **3,380 threats** recorded in the 2017-2018 school year, **a 62% increase** from 2,085 threats in the 2016-2017 school year. **279 incidents of violence** occurred in the 2017-2018 school year, compared to 131 events in 2016-2017 school year – **an increase of 113%**.
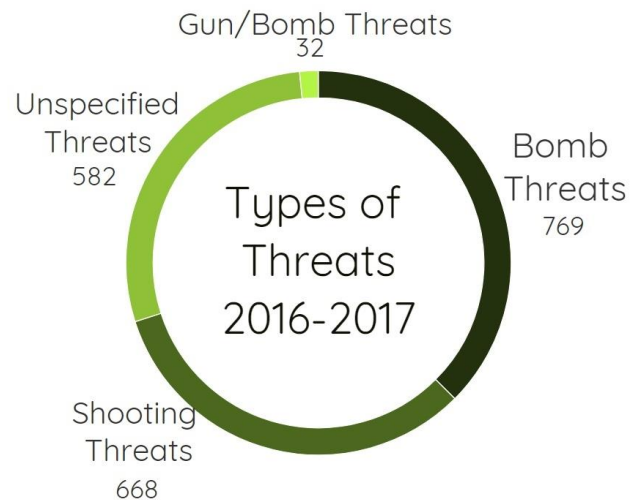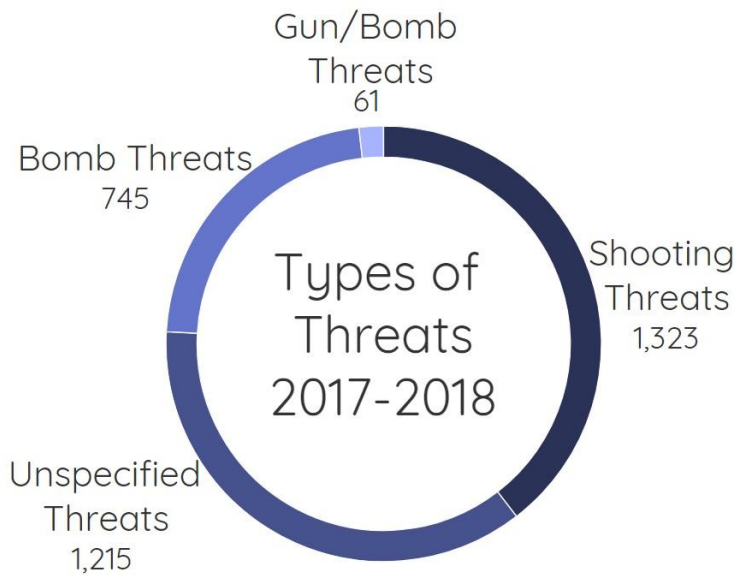
Threats of violence

For purposes of this research, 'threats' are defined as an expressed intent to do harm. The number of threats in the 2017-2018 school year increased 62% from the 2016-2017 school year. In addition, there was a significant increase **within the 2017-2018** school year itself. **1,494 MORE** threats occurred in the spring of 2018 than the fall of 2017, resulting in an **increase of 159%.**

159%
Increase

942
Fall 2017

2,436
Spring 2018
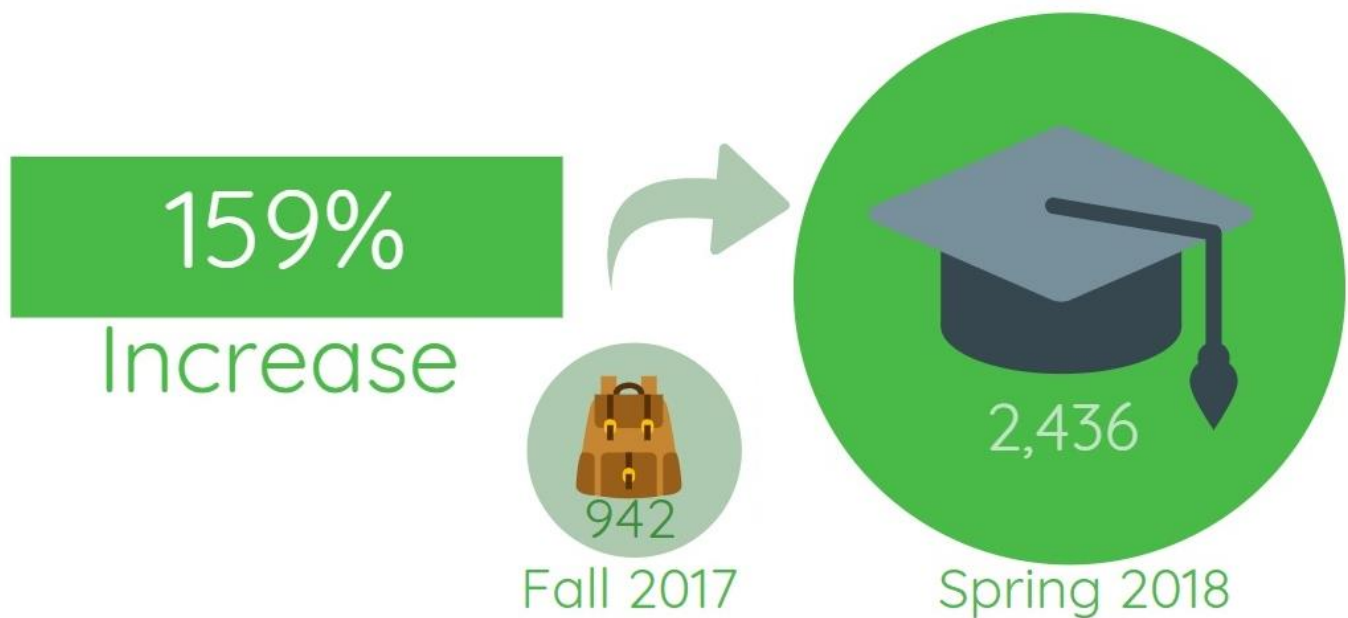
Types of threats

The most common threats recorded in the 2017-2018 school year were **shooting threats (38.8% of all threats)**, followed by **generalized or unspecified threats of violence (35.8%)**, and **bomb threats (22.5%)**.

Types of
Threats
2017-2018

Gun/Bomb
Threats
61

Bomb Threats
745

Shooting
Threats
1,323

Unspecified
Threats
1,215

Types of
Threats
2016-2017

Gun/Bomb Threats
32

Unspecified
Threats
582

Bomb
Threats
769

Shooting
Threats
668

This is a slight change from the 2016-2017 school year when bomb threats were the most common (34.6%) followed by shooting threats (30%) and unspecified threats (26%).

Method of delivery of threats

While the method of delivery of threats was not always reported, when it was reported, **social media was the most common source of threats,** accounting for **39.2%** of all threats in the 2017-2018 school year. This is relatively unchanged from 40% in the 2016-2017 school year.

In 2017-2018, written threats were discovered within the school 20% of time, most commonly in the restroom. Verbal comments were the source of threats 12.7% of the time.

39.2%

39.2% of threats made involve social media.

Individuals who made threats of violence

During the 2017-2018 school year, ESSN began to track information related to the sex, age, and affiliation of those who either made threats or perpetrated incidents of violence. While this information was not always known or reported, when it was available, it was analyzed for both incidents and threats.

When the data was available, **81% of all threats of violence during the 2017-2018 school year came from students**. Juveniles who were not students at the impacted school were the source of threats 7.3% of the time, followed by adults (other than parents or staff) 6.8% of the time. Parents and staff were the source of the threat less than 1% of the time. **Males were the source of threats 83% of the time.** Regardless of sex, the age of those who made threats (when known) ranged from 9 – 81 years of age: **41% were 13 – 15 years old**, **40% were 16 – 18 years old**, 12% were 18 years or older, and 8% were 12 years or younger.
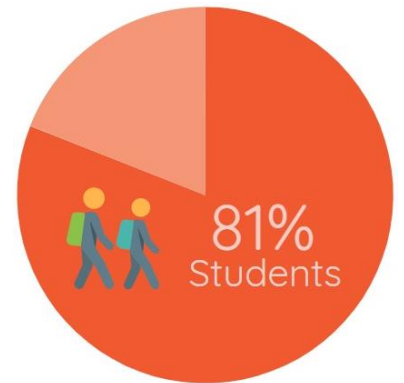
Types of schools impacted by threats

In the 2017-2018 school year, high schools were impacted most frequently by threats (59%), followed by middle schools (25%), and elementary schools (17%).

The Parkland shooting's impact on threats

43% of all the threats documented in the 2017-2018 school year occurred just in the **30 days** after Parkland. It is important to note that this number is significantly underreported due to the sheer volume of threats that occurred in the days following the tragedy, which resulted in numerous threats never being reported in the media. Despite this, prior to the Parkland event, there was an average of 10.2 threats per day, which **rose to an average of 24.2 per day after**.

Average Threats Per Day | **Before & After Parkland**

Before Parkland — 10.2
After Parkland — 24.2
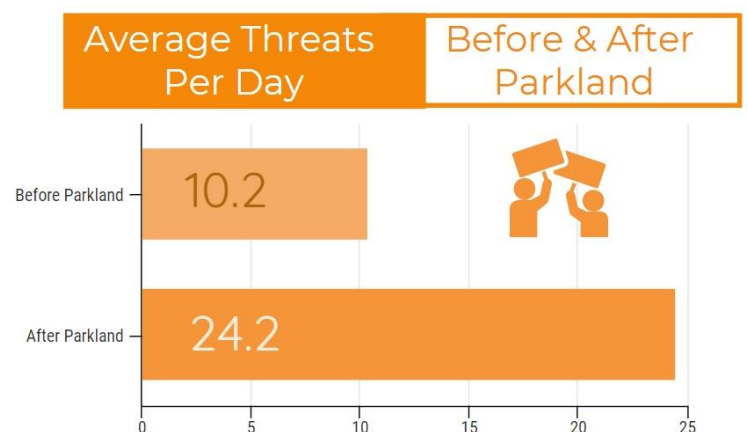
Incidents of violence

The 2017-2018 school year saw **279 incidents of violence** compared to 131 events in the 2016-2017 school year. In addition to the **increase of 113%** from the previous year, a significant increase in the number of violent incidents occurred from fall of 2017 to spring of 2018.
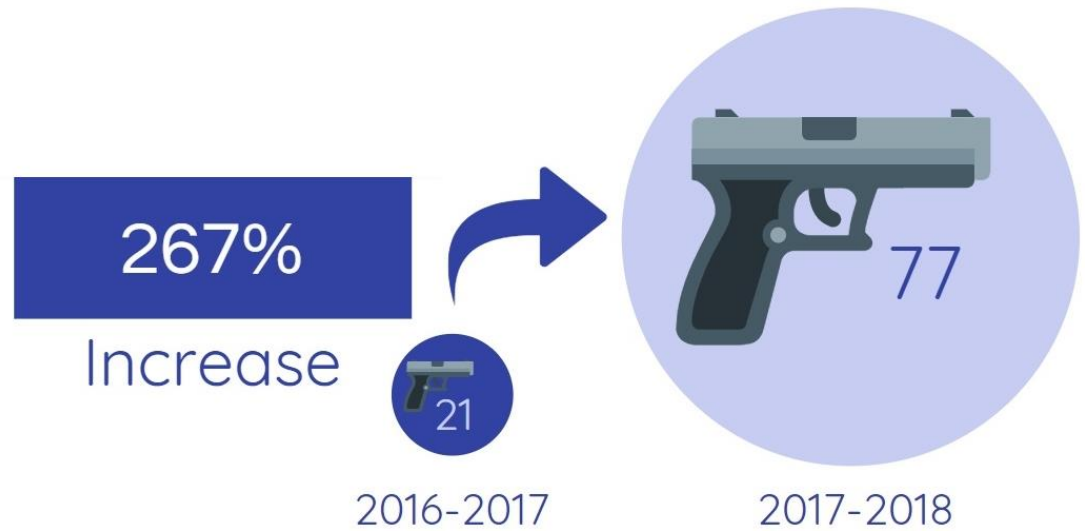
109% Increase

90 Fall 2017

188 Spring 2018
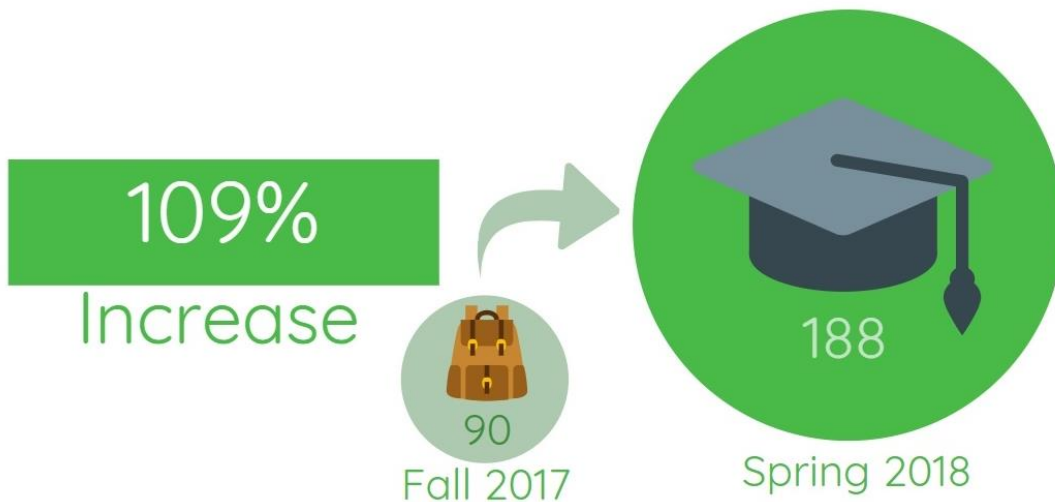
The rate of violent incidents increased by 109% from the fall to the spring of the 2017-2018 school year. 90 violent incidents occurred in the fall of 2018 and 188 incidents of violence occurred in the spring of 2018.

Types of incidents

The most frequent type of incident during the 2017-2018 school year was **guns found on campus,** (77 instances or **28%** of all incidents), followed by **shootings or shots fired** (70 events or **25%** of all incidents), and **thwarted attacks or plots** (38 events or **14%** of all incidents).

Guns Found — 77

Shooting/Shots Fired — 70

Thwarted Plot — 38

0   20   40   60   80
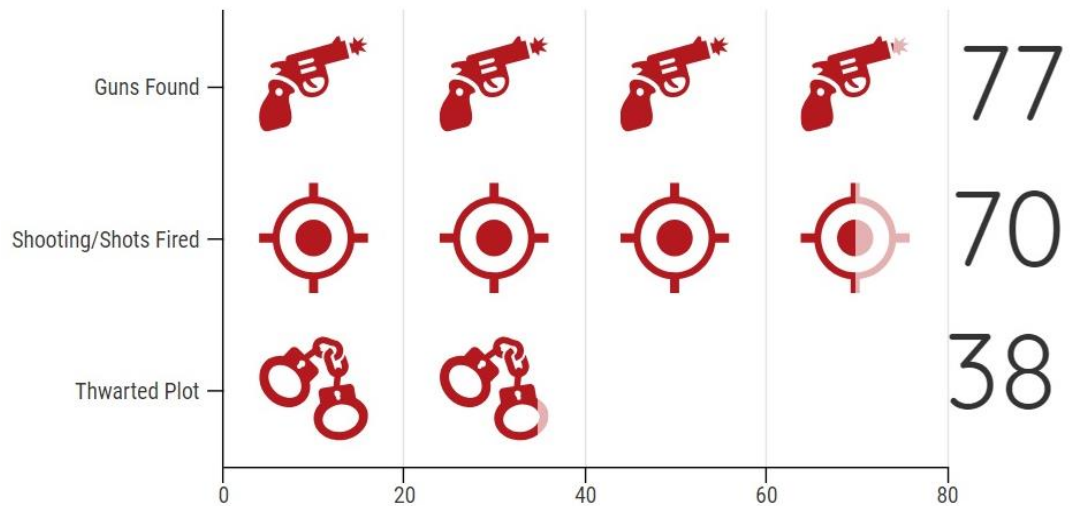
Guns found - The number of guns found on campus was not only the most common incident, but also an area that showed a significant increase. The *77 guns* reported in the entire 2017-2018 school year was an **overall increase of a staggering 267%**. Only 21 guns were reported in the 2016-2017 school year.

267% Increase

21
2016-2017

77
2017-2018

There was also a significant increase in guns brought on campus after the Parkland shooting, with 28 guns found before and 49 after, a **75% increase within the same school year**.

Shootings and/or shots fired – The manner in which "school shootings" or "shots fired" are defined differs between data sets. For the purpose of this report, an incident was categorized as a "shooting" when shots were deliberately fired on the campus of a school with the intent to cause harm. An event was categorized as "shots fired" when a weapon was discharged on school grounds that was not considered targeted violence. There were **35 school shootings** in the 2017-2018 school year, a **30% increase** from the 27 shootings that

30% Increase

27
2016-2017

35
2017-2018

occurred in the 2016-2017 school year. The number of incidents of shots fired also increased from 21 in 2016-2017 to 35 in 2017-2018.

In the 2016-2017 school year, shootings or instances of shots fired accounted for a higher percent of incidents (36.6%)

compared to 25% this past year, but **the actual number of shootings or shots fired was higher in the 2017-2018 school year** - a total of 70 versus 49.

Thwarted plots - More than **38 planned attacks were thwarted** during the 2017-2018 school year, comprising 14% of all incidents recorded. **71%** of all the thwarted plots in the school year (27 potential attacks) **occurred from January to June of 2018**, compared to 29% of the thwarted attacks (11 instances) that were discovered in the fall of 2017. More than half (55%) of all the thwarted plots in the school year were uncovered after the Parkland shooting on February 14th.

Bomb incidents – 1 detonation, 4 explosive devices, and 22 suspicious items accounted for 10% of all violent incidents in the 2017-2018 school year. In the 2016-2017 school year, 2 detonations, 2 explosive devices, and 24 suspicious items accounted for 21% of all violent incidents. Still, **bomb threats and incidents accounted for 22% of all the threats and incidents** recorded this past school year, compared to 37% of all threats and incidents the previous year.
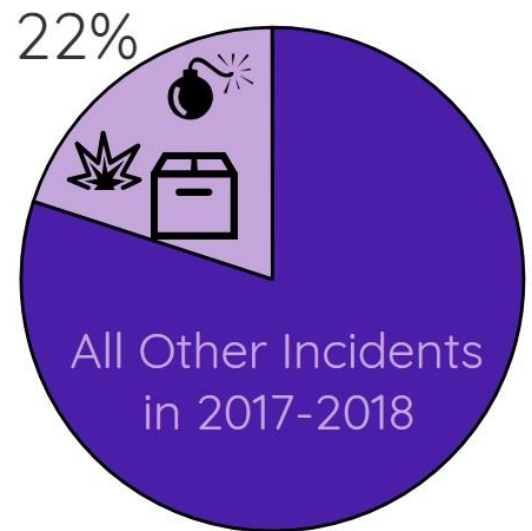
Suicides on campus - Suicides that occurred on school campuses accounted for 4% of all violent incidents. While this percentage hasn't changed significantly when compared to the 2016-2017 school year, **the actual number of suicides more than doubled from 4 to 10** in 2017-2018.

Individuals who perpetrated violence

As was the case with threats, the **majority (79%) of all violent incidents** in the 2017-2018 school year **were perpetrated by students** followed by adults who were not parents or staff members (14%). The rate of violence by staff, parent, or non-student juvenile perpetrators was 2% or less for each group. **94% of all incidents of violence were perpetrated by males.**

Regardless of sex, the age of the known perpetrators of violence ranged from 8 – 57 years of age. **44% were 16 -18 years old**, 30% were 13 – 15 years old, 20% were 18 years or older, and 5% were 12 years or younger.

79% Students
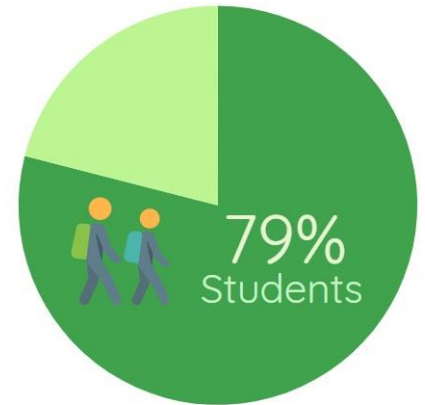
Types of schools where violence occurred

The breakdown of the type of schools impacted by incidents of violence is similar to that of threats noted earlier in the report. During the 2017-2018 school year, 72% of violent incidents occurred in high schools, 22% in middle schools, and 16% in elementary schools.

The overall impact of the Parkland shooting

An examination of pre and post Parkland data indicates that while the actual number of violent incidents increased overall in the 2017-2018 school year, the increase was not particularly significant after the Parkland shooting. Roughly half of the violent incidents took place before the shooting and half after. There were 136 incidents of violence in the school year before the Parkland shooting (49%) and 142 incidents after (51%).

It could be argued that **the Parkland shooting was not the catalyst for the violent incidents and threats that followed, but was instead a horrific example of the overall increase in violence that was already occurring during the 2017-2018 school year**.

As noted earlier in the report, there were significant increases, however, in both **the frequency of threats, and the number of guns brought to school** in the days immediately following the shooting event in Parkland.

30 days after Parkland

The most significant impact of the Parkland shooting was in the immediate aftermath of the event. Schools were impacted the most during this time period as related to both threats and incidents of violence.

In the 30 days immediately following the tragedy:

35% of ALL school-based threats occured

27% of ALL school-based violent incidents occured
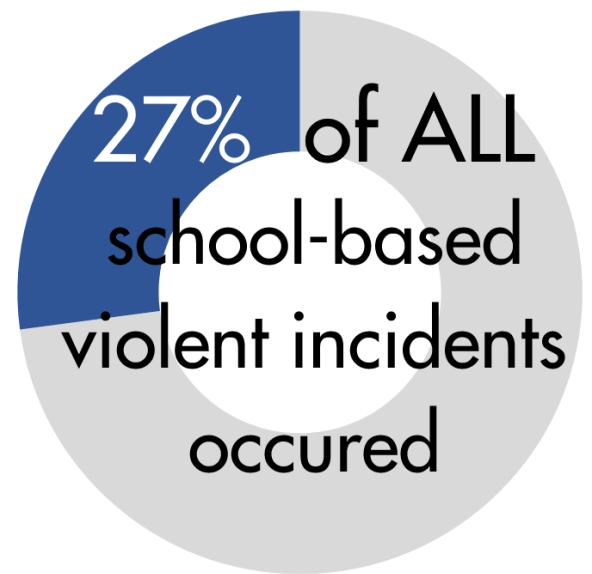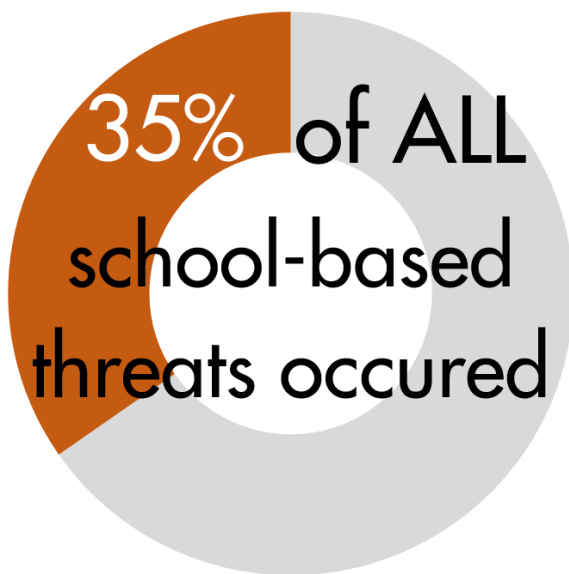
The most dramatic increase in the 30-day time period was noted in the number of guns found on school campuses in the wake of the shooting.

47%
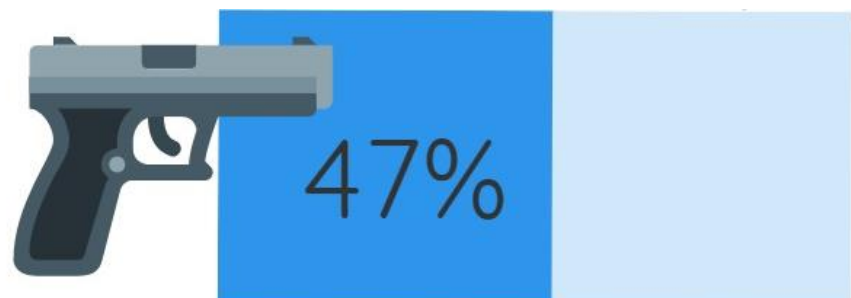
36 guns were found on campus, 47% of the guns found all school year.

Recommendations

This report addresses two factors that are impediments to improving school safety:

(1) the lack of consistent information about violent threats and incidents in schools along with recommendations for safety practices, and

(2) the fragmentation of information and resources between the educational and emergency response communities.

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 to an everyday operation for educators that involves planning for, preventing, and responding to the potential for violence.

ESSN founders Dr. Amy Klinger and Amanda Klinger are the authors of a forthcoming book, **Keeping Students Safe Every Day**: *How to Prepare for and Respond to School Violence, Natural Disasters, and Other Hazards*, that provides information, insights, and specific strategies to assist schools in preventing and responding to violent incidents and threats. The following recommendations are examined at length in this work:

Acknowledge the impact of violent incidents and threats on academic achievement and emotional safety

Meta-analyses of research on the impact of school violence and perceptions of school safety on achievement clearly establishes two important truths. The first is that when violence occurs in a school, learning stops. The second, more subtle indication of the research is that when students feel that violence might occur, learning is suppressed and emotional safety is compromised.

Examine the role of law enforcement in schools

In response to high-profile active shooter events in schools, there has been an overemphasis on introducing full-time law enforcement into schools, usually through a school resource officer (SRO) or community police officer. Although this expensive proposition seems to solve some superficial problems and is clearly a public relations win, there is a need to critically examine the role of law enforcement in schools. To question the validity and value of a law enforcement officer in a school is often seen as being critical of law enforcement, but this isn't the case. Educators have a professional obligation to objectively assess and evaluate every program that is implemented in schools.

There are many instances where the presence of a law enforcement officer in a school quite literally saved lives. The number of times when the presence of a police officer was a deterrent to a violent act that never occurred cannot necessarily be measured. Well-trained school resource officers can form positive, trusting relationships with students that can help improve strained relationships between law enforcement and the communities they serve.

Conversely, instances have also occurred in which officers in schools have reacted with excessive force, made errors in judgement, or did not adequately anticipate the unique attributes of the educational setting, all of which resulted in potentially dangerous situations.

The role of police in schools requires an officer who has a foot in both worlds: law enforcement *and* education. Like teachers, an officer needs to have adequate training that is specific to education. A crisis event in a school is not the same as a crisis event in a shopping mall and cannot be treated as such. It is unfair and unsafe to place police officers in educational settings without the benefit of adequate training to understand the unique setting in which they are working. They cannot simply implement the same law enforcement principles and procedures used elsewhere on the school setting.

Decentralize authority and training

One of the most significant paradigm shifts that must occur in order to ensure safer schools is a transition from the current highly centralized authority for decision making and crisis response. Typically, the only individual in the school who has had any crisis-response training and has been tasked with all the decision-making capabilities is the principal - the person who is most likely to be unavailable or compromised in the midst of a crisis event. When school staffs are untrained and not empowered, and authority is highly centralized, the school is vulnerable during a crisis event as the staff and students are left with a minimal idea of what to do and no direction on when to do it.

Diversifying and decentralizing authority is a must for every school because, in truth, school stakeholders such as teachers and support staff are the first 'first responders'. The harsh reality is that the most likely responders in school crisis situations are classroom teachers and support staff.

Stop buying "stuff" and allocate resources for training

In the wake of the Parkland shooting, U.S. schools are spending millions of dollars on everything from metal detectors to computerized sign-in systems to bulletproof whiteboards, all of which serve only a single purpose, yet a recent Rand Institute study (among others), provides virtually no data indicating the items' efficacy for that limited purpose.

Another issue is the allocation of a school's limited financial resources. Every dollar that is spent on a single-use gadget or gizmo is one less dollar spent on training that will save lives. In most schools, for the cost of just a few door-blocking mechanisms or a student accountability app, direct training can be provided to literally every staff member, student, and parent. Comprehensive, all-hazards training prepares people to respond to a variety of events, whereas many safety products, such as door jams or metal detectors, address only one specific type of threat.

Methodology

Data Collection

Other than this series of reports, there are no publically accessible national data on current threats and incidents of violence in schools. 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 any fashion, 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 2017-2018 school year began August 1, 2017, including threats and incidents through June 30, 2018.

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. In the days following the Parkland shooting in particular, the rate of threats and incidents was so great that media reports often combined threats and incidents together in a generic fashion. As a result, the number of actual incidents and threats that occurred in the wake of the Parkland shooting may e significantly 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, 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 they are not consistently reported and/or available to the general public.

Conclusions

The rate of threats and incidents of violence in U.S. K-12 schools is increasing.

A total of 3,380 threats were documented in the 2017-2018 school year, a 62% increase from the previous school year. There were 279 incidents of violence this year compared to 131 events in the 2016-2017 school year – an increase of 113%.

62%
INCREASE

2,085
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3,380
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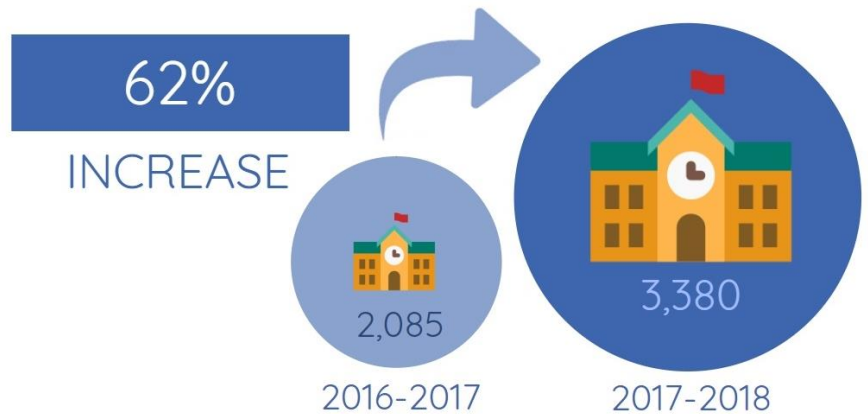
Threats and incidents of violence impact ALL schools either directly or indirectly.

Incidents and threats of violence were documented in all states during the 2017-2018 school year and impacted elementary, middle, and high schools. Even if a school did not directly experience an incident or threat of violence, the sheer number of incidents, the intense level of attention, and the heightened anxiety among school stakeholders has an impact. While the rate of violent incidents is obviously the larger concern, the frequency and severity of threats also negatively impacts schools as instructional time is lost, community and school resources are consumed, and perhaps most significantly, anxiety, fear, and trauma increases among students, staff, and parents.

Educator's
SCHOOL
SAFETY
NETWORK
By Educators, For Everyone
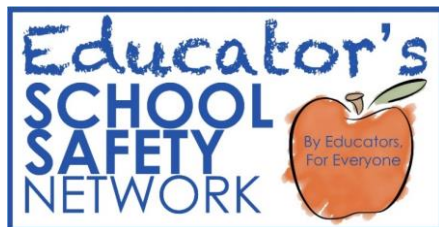
For the complete report, go to: www.eSchoolSafety.org/violence

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

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