

# Ten Essential Actions to Improve School Safety

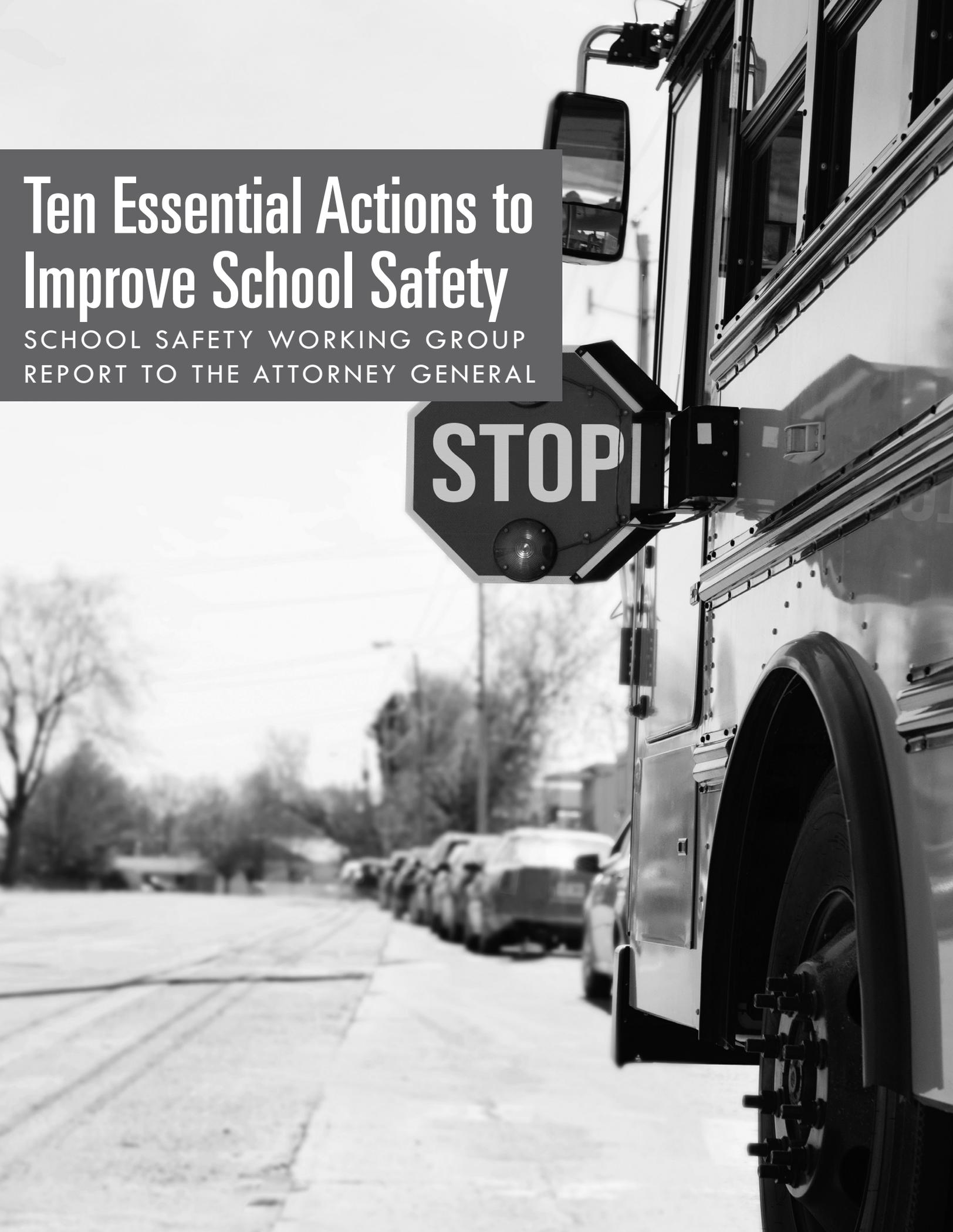
School Safety Working Group  
Report to the Attorney General





# Ten Essential Actions to Improve School Safety

SCHOOL SAFETY WORKING GROUP  
REPORT TO THE ATTORNEY GENERAL



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# Letter from the Director of the COPS Office

Dear Attorney General Barr:

We all hope every time we hear of a violent attack on a school that we will be able to stop it from ever happening again. Prevention requires all of us working together—and as law enforcement professionals and school officials, it is our responsibility to be prepared to respond if and when critical incidents take place.

In this report, the COPS Office's School Safety Working Group identifies 10 essential things schools, school districts, and law enforcement agencies can do to mitigate and prevent school violence as well as to facilitate swift and effective law enforcement assistance when it is necessary. An individual school or school district may not be able to implement all of these suggestions, but considering them and adopting measures where it is possible and appropriate to do so can make our schools and our children safer.

The members of the School Safety Working Group and the national law enforcement organizations they represent are pleased to present their efforts on this important issue. Working together and with our school communities, we will continue to strive to make our schools safe places of learning.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Phil Keith". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long, sweeping tail on the letter "h".

Phil Keith  
Director  
Office of Community Oriented Policing Services



# Introduction

Although statistically they are rare, school shootings and mass casualty attacks have an enormous impact on our communities. This impact often leads to immense pressure on school administrators and law enforcement officials to “do something” quickly to protect our children in school. Hasty and reactive decision-making often results in implementation of new policies and adoption of new equipment and technology based on scant—if any—evidence of their effectiveness.

Understanding this challenge, the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ), Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS Office) asked its School Safety Working Group to identify from a law enforcement perspective the 10 most essential actions schools, school districts, and law enforcement agencies can take to prevent mass casualty attacks in our nation’s schools and, when prevention is not enough, to respond rapidly and effectively to end the threat as quickly as possible to save lives. While the cost associated with some of these strategies may be significant, for others it is relatively modest.

It should be noted that critical actions described in this document are applicable not only to school shootings but also to all areas of school safety, including weather disasters and traumatic events such as student suicide.

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"While the National Sheriffs' Association embraces every child as our own, every teacher as a relative, and every law enforcement officer as our brothers and sisters, we know we must also strive to educate ourselves to ensure their safety. Familiarizing ourselves with the *Ten Essential Actions to Improve School Safety* is one of those steps that we can take to help bring every one of these family members home safely each night."

— *Yavapai County (Arizona) Sheriff Scott Mascher*  
*Chair, National Sheriffs' Association School Safety Committee.*

---

The working group comprised the following representatives of national law enforcement organizations:

[Association of State  
Criminal Investigative Agencies](#)

Louis Grever  
Executive Director

Robert Schurmeier  
Executive Director, North Carolina State  
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[International Association of Campus  
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Senior Program Specialist

**Every member of . . . the School Safety Working  
Group would much rather prevent a shooting long  
before an attacker arrives on campus.**

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\* The COPS Office would like to especially acknowledge the work of Jeff Allison, who developed the preliminary draft version of this report and contributed significantly to the overall project.

The essential actions for school safety are predicated on these guiding principles:

- A balanced approach to enhance safety and security in the learning environment
- A holistic approach that reflects physical safety, mental health, and personal connections to the school community
- A multidisciplinary approach that involves school personnel—including teachers, administrators, counselors, mental health professionals, and support staff such as janitors and school bus drivers—as well as law enforcement, other first responders, community-based resources, and families
- A focus on attack prevention via intervention rather than solely victim mitigation

These guiding principles reflect the working group’s consensus that strategies for protecting students must be holistic. That is, they must be comprehensive and involve multidisciplinary planning and implementation. Comprehensive school safety and security plans address prevention, response, and recovery from mass casualty attacks and other dangerous incidents.

Law enforcement agencies have become extremely proficient in responding to critical incidents, including school shootings. Our tactics have changed significantly in the 20 years since the 1999 shooting at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado. We no longer wait for special weapons and tactics (SWAT) teams with their sophisticated weapons, negotiators, and sharpshooters; we go in immediately to seek out and eliminate the threat even when only one officer is available. In fact, every member of the organizations represented on the School Safety Working Group would much rather prevent a shooting long *before* an attacker arrives on campus. To achieve our shared goal of preventing mass casualty attacks on students, we must all play a role. This means our approaches must be multidisciplinary and include school officials, law enforcement, mental health professionals, and others. In developing school safety and security plans, we must also find a way to ensure that all voices in the school community are heard. Faculty, staff, administrators, school counselors, nurses, school resource officers (SRO) and other school-based law enforcement officials, parents, and students must have a vehicle for communicating their concerns and best ideas for addressing the challenge of targeted violence in our schools. By empowering students and parents we can begin to reduce fear in our communities and build collaborative responses to the challenge.

Equally important, our approaches must be balanced. Strategies and tactics that create a generation of children afraid to go to school, although well-intentioned, still violate the universal principle of helping: First, do no harm.

Consistent with these guiding principles, we offer *Ten Essential Actions to Improve School Safety: Law Enforcement Perspective* as a guide to assist schools, school districts, and law enforcement agencies as they endeavor to protect our nation’s children at school.



# Actions in Brief

The 10 actions described in this publication represent measures that can be taken to ensure school communities' mental and emotional security as well as their physical safety, as shown in table 1.

**Table 1. Ten essential actions for physical and emotional safety of schools**

Physical safety	Emotional security
1. Comprehensive school safety assessment	2. School climate
3. Campus, building, and classroom security	4. Anonymous reporting systems
5. Coordination with first responders	6. Behavior threat assessment and management
7. School-based law enforcement	8. Mental health resources
9. Drills	10. Social media monitoring

Each of these actions will be discussed in more detail in the pages that follow.

# **Ten Essential Actions**

# 1. Comprehensive School Safety Assessment

The foundation for all school safety and security planning and operations is a comprehensive risk assessment that identifies the highest probability threats, their potential consequences, and the school or school district's vulnerabilities to those threats.

To be effective, the risk assessment and development of a school safety plan must be undertaken by an interagency, multidisciplinary team with one person serving as the team leader. The *Final Report of the Federal Commission on School Safety* refers to this as a Security Management Team.<sup>1</sup> The risk assessment should be treated as a living document that is reviewed and updated annually based on input from stakeholders and changes in school policy.

In its *Guide to Preventing and Responding to School Violence: 2nd Edition*, the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) underscores the importance of having a school safety plan assign all faculty and staff to clearly defined roles consistent with the tenets of the Incident Command System (ICS).<sup>2</sup>

Elements that are sometimes missing from school safety plans include the following:

- Emergency mass notification for the school community
- Monitoring and managing information being released in the public domain
- Family reunification
- Identifying mental health resources ahead of time to provide post-incident critical incident stress debriefings and long-term trauma care
- The possibility of a contagion effect within a school district following a student suicide, and within schools and school districts following mass casualty attacks anywhere in the nation

The Federal Commission suggests using the risk assessment to “prioritize security enhancements based on available resources.”<sup>3</sup>

**The risk assessment should be . . . reviewed and updated annually.**

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<sup>1</sup> Federal Commission on School Safety, *Final Report*.

<sup>2</sup> IACP, *Guide for Preventing and Responding to School Violence*.

<sup>3</sup> Federal Commission on School Safety, *Final Report*, 120.

It is essential that schools, school districts, and law enforcement agencies recognize that conducting a comprehensive risk assessment and developing a school safety plan does not have to be an expensive endeavor that relies on outside consultants. Free assessment and planning resources developed under the auspices of the U.S. Department of Education (DoED) are available from the Readiness and Emergency Management for Schools Technical Assistance Center (REMS TA Center) at <https://rems.ed.gov>.

Free assessment tools are also available from Safe and Sound Schools at <https://www.safeandsoundschools.org/programs/toolkits/straight-a-safety-toolkits/>.

### **Additional resources**

DHS (U.S. Department of Homeland Security). *K–12 School Security Guide (2nd Edition) and School Security Survey*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2019. <https://www.dhs.gov/publication/k-12-school-security-guide>.

NASP (National Association of School Psychologists). *Assessing the Safety of the School Environment Using the Framework for Safe and Successful Schools*. Bethesda, MD: National Association of School Psychologists, 2017. <https://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources-and-podcasts/school-climate-safety-and-crisis/systems-level-prevention/a-framework-for-safe-and-successful-schools>.

NASSP (National Association of Secondary School Principals). *Activity 6 Evaluating Your School Safety Plan*. Accessed July 31, 2019. <https://www.nassp.org/professional-learning/online-professional-development/leading-success/module-11/activity-6-evaluating-your-school-safety-plan/>.

Secure Schools Alliance. “Education Facilities Assessment.” Accessed October 3, 2019. <https://seureschoolresources.org/education-facilities-assessment/>.

U.S. Department of Education. *Guide for Developing High-Quality School Emergency Operations Plans*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, 2013. <https://www.phe.gov/Preparedness/Planning/Documents/eops-k-8.pdf>.

## 2. School Climate

The Federal Commission posited that fostering a culture of connectedness is an important aspect of school safety. The commission pointed to the isolation and detachment often manifested by school shooters. Conversely, a positive school climate promotes respectful, trusting, and caring relationships and open lines of communication. Students feel comfortable asking for help or reporting concerns about their peers.

In 2008, the U.S. Secret Service and the DoED published a report often referred to as the Bystander Report, in which one conclusion drawn from a study of targeted school violence was that school climate affected whether bystanders came forward with information related to threats. Specifically, “Bystanders who came forward with information commented that they were influenced by positive relations with one or more adults, teachers, or staff, and/or a feeling within the school that the information would be taken seriously and addressed appropriately.”<sup>4</sup>

In May 2019, the Jefferson County (Colorado) Schools Department of School Safety asked student leaders at one of its high schools what would stop school violence around the country. “Number 1 answer – positive connections developed by adults & teachers in their lives.”<sup>5</sup>

Schools are taking steps to build cultures that are safe, welcoming, and inclusive. Measures being put into place include the following:

- Violence and bullying prevention programs
- Training faculty, staff, students, and parents to recognize indicators of potential self-harm, suicide, or violence
- Social emotional learning programs
- Bystander intervention training

The IACP recommends establishing a climate that “encourages and enables students, teachers, parents and/or guardians to report threats and acts of violence.”<sup>6</sup> What is being described is a climate of trust where, as a principal from Michigan said, kids look out for and take care of one another.

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<sup>4</sup> U.S. Secret Service, *Prior Knowledge*, 7.

<sup>5</sup> Jefferson County Schools Department of School Safety, “Had a chance to engage.”

<sup>6</sup> IACP, *Guide for Preventing and Responding to School Violence*.

## **A positive school climate promotes respectful, trusting, and caring relationships and open lines of communication.**

The U.S. Department of Education promotes the widely used Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) multi-tiered approach to improve social, emotional and academic outcomes for students. Information on implementing PBIS can be found at [www.pbis.org](http://www.pbis.org). Student climate surveys and best practices for improving school climate are available at <https://safesupportivelearning.ed.gov>.

### **Additional resources**

NASP. *Guidance for Measuring and Using School Climate Data*. Bethesda, MD: National Association of School Psychologists, 2019. <https://www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources-and-podcasts/school-climate-safety-and-crisis/systems-level-prevention/guidance-for-measuring-and-using-school-climate-data>.

# 3. Campus, Building, and Classroom Security

According to the Federal Commission, “One of the biggest concerns raised by schools and school districts since the Parkland shooting has been their inability to easily sift through the multitude of security options, equipment, technologies, etc., that are available to their schools.”<sup>7</sup>

The *Safety and Security Guidelines for K–12 Schools* developed by the Partner Alliance for Safer Schools recognize this challenge as well. The guidelines acknowledge that there is no one-size-fits-all solution for school safety and security.<sup>8</sup> For that reason, the alliance and the Federal Commission believe it is essential for schools and school districts to begin their planning for security upgrades with a comprehensive risk assessment that identifies gaps in campus, building, and classroom security.

Identifying school safety and security issues should include student input to identify and rank vulnerabilities and offer solutions. The student perspective is unique in the school setting, and as a partner in the process, students will have increased ownership in the solutions agreed upon as well as improved communications with school and law enforcement officials.

It is also worth noting that 70 percent of public schools in the United States were built prior to 1970. This means retrofitting for school safety should be evaluated as part of a larger review of general maintenance.

The Federal Commission recommends that once gaps are identified, schools and school districts develop plans for acquiring and deploying needed technology and equipment in a manner that does not sacrifice the school's primary educational and developmental missions. The Federal Commission acknowledges that the protective measures implemented will vary based on the characteristics of the site, location, resources, and personnel available. Notwithstanding these and other differences in school characteristics, schools should adopt security plans using a layered approach that addresses the campus, buildings, and classrooms. Further, schools must consider the particular needs of the student population, including those with special needs, and other individuals who access the school to ensure security measures work for all members of the community.

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<sup>7</sup> Federal Commission on School Safety, *Final Report*, 126.

<sup>8</sup> PASS, “Pass School Safety and Security Guidelines.”

## **Retrofitting for school safety should be . . . part of a larger review of general maintenance.**

The COPS Office School Safety Working Group strongly affirms that, at a minimum, all schools should have the following protective measures:

- Building and classroom numbering systems or other methods for clearly identifying locations to expedite emergency response
- Classroom doors that can be locked from the inside or remotely; if doors are locked remotely, keys or key cards must be readily accessible by law enforcement<sup>\*</sup>
- Removable window and door glass coverings that prevent an armed assailant from seeing into classrooms<sup>†</sup>
- Secure, uncluttered safe spaces called “hard corners” in every classroom where students will be safe from projectiles fired into the classroom from outside

The Federal Commission, Safe and Sound Schools, the National Sheriffs Association, and the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School Public Safety Commission also advocate for the use of the following:

- Access control systems, which are being used by 94 percent of public schools
- Video surveillance, which is being used by 81 percent of public schools<sup>9</sup>

The Student, Teachers, and Officers Prevent (STOP) School Violence grant programs are another resource available to school districts and law enforcement agencies looking to improve the safety and security of our nation’s schools. The STOP School Violence Act of 2018 (H.R. 4909) seeks to improve school security by providing students and teachers with the tools they need to recognize, respond quickly to, and prevent acts of violence. Both the COPS Office and the Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA) offer grants to improve security within our nation's schools and on school grounds through evidence-based programs. To review the COPS Office and BJA STOP School Violence grant programs, please visit <https://cops.usdoj.gov/svpp> and <https://www.bja.gov/stop-school-violence-program/index.html>.

In addition, the IACP and the Federal Commission advocate for the use of Crime Prevention through Environmental Design (CPTED), which is taught to SROs by the National Association of School Resource Officers (NASRO) and can also be taught to teachers and school staff.

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<sup>\*</sup> Some schools use exterior lockboxes to securely store keys or key cards for quick access by law enforcement.

<sup>†</sup> Doors and windows made of reinforced materials are desirable but may not be feasible for all schools.

<sup>9</sup> National Center for Education Statistics, “Indicators.”

Other equipment and technology acquisitions to consider, resources permitting, include the following:

- Automated external defibrillators (AED) and stop-the-bleed kits
- Locating a radio repeater in the school building to enhance communication with and between emergency responders
- Silent panic alarms
- Emergency two-way communications with all classrooms, offices, and large capacity spaces (gyms, cafeterias, locker rooms, outdoor areas)

Beyond the protective measures set forth by the COPS Office School Safety Working Group as critical for all schools, we reiterate that there is no one-size-fits-all solution for school safety and security. The PASS guidelines establish a tier continuum approach with tier 1 considered a starting point and tier 4 comprising the most aggressive security measures.<sup>10</sup> The COPS Office School Safety Working Group fully understands that not every school will need to or have the resources to move to tier 4, but all schools should implement readily available physical security solutions.

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<sup>10</sup> PASS, "PASS School Safety and Security Guidelines."



## 4. Anonymous Reporting Systems

The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) report *A Study of Active Shooter Incidents in the United States between 2000 and 2013* identified 160 incidents, of which 27 occurred in K–12 schools resulting in 57 deaths and 60 individuals wounded.<sup>11</sup> In a follow-up study, the FBI looked at the pre-attack behaviors of the shooters and found that, while many of those observing concerning behaviors in the shooter communicated directly with him or her, only 41 percent reported their concerns to law enforcement.<sup>12</sup>

The previously cited U.S. Secret Service study showed that at least one other person had knowledge of the attacker’s plan in 81 percent of incidents, and more than one person had such knowledge in 59 percent of incidents.<sup>13</sup>

Anonymous reporting systems have been shown to be effective in identifying and communicating potential targeted violence in schools as well as identifying suicidal threats. Safe2Tell in Colorado received more than 1,500 reports of suicidal threats in the second semester (January–June) of the 2017–2018 school year.<sup>14</sup>

Successful anonymous reporting systems educate all members of the school community on indicators of potential self-harm or violence and how to share this information so officials can intervene before violence occurs. Anonymous reporting systems use a variety of vehicles for receiving information about concerning behavior, including mobile applications, online, email, and phone. Among the most important aspects of anonymous reporting systems are robust tracking and accountability measures to ensure adequate follow-up on all reported threats.

The COPS Office School Safety Working Group and the Federal Commission recommend that schools and school districts establish anonymous reporting systems for members of the school community to use to convey information about concerning behaviors. The commission pointed to Colorado’s Safe2Tell and the “See, Say, Do Something” campaign in Texas as examples of comprehensive anonymous reporting systems.<sup>15</sup>

**Successful anonymous reporting systems educated all members of the school community . . . officials can intervene before violence occurs.**

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<sup>11</sup> FBI, *A Study of Active Shooter Incidents*.

<sup>12</sup> FBI, *A Study of Pre-Attack Behaviors*.

<sup>13</sup> U.S. Secret Service, *Prior Knowledge*.

<sup>14</sup> Safe2Tell Colorado, *Annual Report*, 11–16.

<sup>15</sup> Federal Commission on School Safety, *Final Report*, 52.

The COPS Office School Safety Working Group went on to recommend that state and local school-based anonymous reporting systems be integrated with the national Averted School Violence (ASV) database, which is funded by the DOJ and administered by the National Police Foundation. The ASV database identifies and studies incidents of targeted school violence that have been prevented to ascertain what factors allowed school officials and law enforcement to successfully intervene before injuries or deaths occurred. For more information about the ASV database go to [www.avertedschoolviolence.org](http://www.avertedschoolviolence.org).

### **Additional resources**

Colorado Office of the Attorney General. "Safe2Tell Colorado." Accessed July 31, 2019. <https://safe2tell.org>.

Planty, M., D. Banks, S. Cutbush, and J. Sherwood. *School Tip Line Toolkit: A Blueprint for Implementation and Sustainability*. Research Triangle Park, NC: RTI International, 2018. <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/252537.pdf>.

## 5. Coordination with First Responders

Even in schools with an SRO, an active shooter or other critical incident will result in state and local law enforcement officers and emergency medical services (EMS) responding to the scene. Advanced planning and joint training are essential to ensure the response is rapid and effective. Achieving this level of coordination will require an even more deliberate and intentional approach by administrators in schools without an SRO, where police services are primarily rendered by a state or local law enforcement agency. The need for coordination can be of even greater importance in rural and underserved communities with limited resources. This situation includes schools with armed or unarmed security officers but no SRO.

The COPS Office School Safety Working Group recommends that coordination between schools and law enforcement begin with the safety assessment and flow through development of policies and the emergency operations plan to training, ongoing drills, and periodic evaluation. It is imperative that roles and responsibilities be clearly defined, clearly communicated, and practiced. In this way, all members of the school community will know what to expect from law enforcement during a critical incident response and vice versa. The IACP *Guide to Preventing and Responding to School Violence* offers more information on the responsibilities of law enforcement agencies and school officials during and after a critical incident.<sup>16</sup>

Some relatively simple but key considerations to help ensure coordination that are often overlooked include the following:

- Joint training between first responders and school officials on the ICS
- Numbering buildings on school campuses so they are readily identifiable to first responders
- Where applicable, ensuring immediate access to school buildings by providing the necessary permissions via RFID (radio-frequency identification), key fobs, easily identified keys maintained in a secured centralized location, or the like
- Performing walkthroughs and providing access to building floor plans to familiarize law enforcement and EMS with building layout prior to an emergency situation
- Providing schools with a two-way radio directly linked to the local PSAP (public safety answering point) to ensure an immediate alert of law enforcement agencies in the event of a critical incident<sup>‡</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> IACP, *Guide for Preventing and Responding to School Violence*.

<sup>‡</sup> During the 2019 active shooter event at the STEM School in Highlands Ranch, Colorado, law enforcement officers arrived in less than two minutes after the first reports of gunfire in part because the school had been provided with a two-way radio to communicate directly with the county emergency communications center.

- Communicating with the public through press conferences and social media must be coordinated before a critical incident; small investments in this important area will pay huge dividends
- Recovery: school officials and first responders working together to ensure rapid transportation of the injured, accounting for individuals who were present, interviewing witnesses, and initiating victim-witness assistance.

It is said that recovery begins the minute the critical incident ends. Law enforcement has a vital role to play in recovery. A prime example is family reunification. Following a major critical incident at a school, parents will be anxious and panicked. The best way to provide reassurance during a difficult time is for law enforcement and school officials to carry out a well-conceived and regularly practiced joint plan for family reunification.

For assistance in developing a family reunification plan, visit [www.safeandsoundschools.org](http://www.safeandsoundschools.org).

### **Additional resources**

National Fire Protection Association. "Standard for Active Shooter/Hostile Event Response (ASHER) Program." Accessed October 3, 2019. <https://www.nfpa.org/codes-and-standards/all-codes-and-standards/list-of-codes-and-standards/detail?code=3000>.

**The need for coordination can be of even greater importance in rural and underserved communities with limited resources.**

## 6. Behavior Threat Assessment and Management Team

The Federal Commission points out that receiving information about potential threats, while extremely important, is only the first step of a three-step process: (1) identify, (2) assess, and (3) manage. When schools and law enforcement agencies receive information about potential threats, they should—time permitting—thoroughly evaluate and corroborate that information, and they can then develop a plan for managing the threat. According to research relied upon by the commission, threat assessment programs are beneficial in (among other things) preventing mass casualty attacks. There is evidence that schools in Virginia employing a threat assessment approach had lower rates of bullying and fewer long-term suspensions. Students in these schools also had a greater willingness to seek help for bullying and threats of violence.<sup>17</sup>

According to the U.S. Secret Service, threat assessments of individuals' concerning behavior are best carried out by multidisciplinary teams comprising professionals including teachers; administrators; school resource officers; and school mental health professionals such as a school psychologist, social worker, or counselor or if necessary other mental health professionals.<sup>18</sup> Schools should give careful consideration to the specific types of individuals who are a part of the threat assessment team. Members of the threat assessment team should be trained in effective threat assessment considerations and processes. If the school does not use SROs, it is recommended that a carefully selected law enforcement officer from the primary agency providing police services to the school serve on the Behavior Threat Assessment and Management (BTAM) team. Based on its composition, the BTAM team is well-positioned to ensure information is shared across the various components of the school community that may have had contact with the individual exhibiting concerning behavior. Assessing all available information and developing a joint plan of action is essential to intervening with individuals on the pathway to violence and getting them the help they need.

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<sup>17</sup> Cornell et al., "A Retrospective Study," cited in Federal Commission on School Safety, *Final Report*.

<sup>18</sup> DHS, "Enhancing School Safety Using a Threat Assessment Model."

Information sharing is critical to the success of the BTAM teams. The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1974 (FERPA) permits a school or district to disclose education records, without consent, to outside law enforcement officials, mental health professionals, and other experts in the community when a health or safety emergency exists. BTAM teams can review information covered by FERPA to protect the student in question and others within the school setting. See <https://studentprivacy.ed.gov/> for further information, including information about the health and emergency exceptions to FERPA as they apply to SROs and school law enforcement units. The COPS Office School Safety Working Group further recommends that the BTAM team be operationally capable of receiving and acting quickly on threat information, including by teleconference after school hours.

**Assessing all available information and developing a joint plan of action is essential.**

# 7. School-Based Law Enforcement

The ability of specially selected and trained SROs to establish trust relationships with students has been demonstrated to prevent school shootings.<sup>19</sup> In addition, there have been numerous documented instances of SROs directly intervening to prevent or quickly mitigate active school shootings.<sup>20</sup>

According to the Federal Commission, “The school personnel best positioned to respond to acts of violence are those with specialized training such as school resource officers (SRO), who are typically sworn law enforcement officers, and school safety officers (SSO), who are typically unsworn school security staff.”<sup>21</sup>

NASRO adopts the federal definition of an SRO as a career law enforcement officer with sworn authority who is deployed by an employing police or sheriff’s department or agency in a community-oriented policing assignment to work in collaboration with one or more schools. NASRO recommends that agencies select officers carefully for SRO assignments and that officers receive at least 40 hours of specialized training in school policing before beginning their assignment.

For the 2015–2016 school year, the National Center for Education Statistics indicated that 42 percent of schools had an SRO present full or part time. Another 15 percent of schools had a security presence other than an SRO. Across the nation, many large urban school districts have their own school police departments.

The working group recognizes that not every community has the resources to place an SRO in each of its schools. Options school districts and individual schools may want to consider include the following:

- Signing a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with local law enforcement agencies to clearly define roles, responsibilities, and expectations for both the school and the agency as well as its officers
- Contracting with local and state law enforcement agencies for off-duty officers to provide school security
- Establishing a substation at the school for local and state law enforcement officers to use for breaks, report writing, and meeting with students and families around school-related issues

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<sup>19</sup> Federal Commission on School Safety, *Final Report*.

<sup>20</sup> Levenson, “Maryland School Officer Stops Armed Student;” Grinberg and Watts, “This Officer Stopped a School Shooter.”

<sup>21</sup> Federal Commission on School Safety, *Final Report*, 101.

- Hiring retired law enforcement officers as school employees or through a contract
- Contracting with a private security company to provide armed or unarmed security officers

If the option that meets the needs of the school or school district involves placing armed personnel that are not sworn law enforcement officers in a school, it is imperative that those individuals receive training that meets industry standards and state requirements.

The selection, training, and supervision of SROs should comport with NASRO's *Standards and Best Practices for School Resource Officers*. It is essential that an MOU be put in place between the school or school district and the law enforcement agency providing the SRO(s). Among other things, the MOU must clearly stipulate the SRO's role especially with regard to enforcement actions.

NASRO training, among the most highly regarded SRO training available, includes training on implicit bias, de-escalation, trauma-informed investigations, adolescent development, and crisis intervention and active shooter situations. It is recommended that all school-based law enforcement and security officers who engage directly with students and may be required to take enforcement actions receive ongoing training that includes these components. The value of an SRO goes beyond responding to critical incidents. They mentor and educate students and build trust, which may have a profound impact on the school's ability to prevent targeted violence and other maladaptive behaviors.

For more information please visit <https://cops.usdoj.gov/supportingsafeschools>.

**Uniformed law enforcement officers . . . can serve as  
a deterrent to crime.**

## 8. Mental Health Resources

A consistent theme that emerged from the Federal Commission’s listening sessions and site visits was the lack of mental health professionals in schools or centers whom students and school personnel can easily access. In a landmark study, the U.S. Secret Service and U.S. Department of Education found that, while most individuals committing attacks on schools had not received a formal mental health evaluation or diagnosis, most attackers exhibited a history of suicide attempts or suicidal thoughts at some point prior to the attack. More than half of the attackers had a documented history of feeling extremely depressed or desperate.<sup>22</sup>

Based on its investigation, the commission stated its belief that “schools have the potential to play a key role in preventing youth mental, emotional, and behavioral difficulties, identifying and supporting students with mental health problems and reducing youth violence.”<sup>23</sup> This requires access to a continuum of mental health services including prevention, early intervention, and treatment. This continuum should include—or have the goal of working toward—an adequate number of school-employed mental health professionals who are trained to provide services in the learning environment; are functioning members of the school team; and contribute to daily accessibility, continuity, and sustainability of services. Schools should also develop collaborative partnerships with community-based and local government social service providers to support students with more intensive mental health needs and sometimes can leverage these partnerships to augment limited funding.

To address critical incidents involving students experiencing mental or emotional health crises, the Los Angeles Unified School District Police Department fields the Mental Health Evaluation Team (MHET). This specialized unit can assist with both acute and long-term interventions with students, teachers, administrators, and other district staff experiencing a mental health crisis.

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<sup>22</sup> U.S. Secret Service, *The Final Report and Findings of the Safe School Initiative*.

<sup>23</sup> Federal Commission, *Final Report*, 28.

**Most attackers exhibited a history of suicide attempts or suicidal thoughts . . . More than half of the attackers had a documented history of feeling extremely depressed or desperate.**

There is a growing consensus that to support the mental and emotional health of students and prevent violence, schools must have access to counselors, psychologists, and social workers who can identify emerging problems and act immediately to intervene.

**Additional resources**

Federal Commission on School Safety. "Readiness and Emergency Management for Schools." Accessed July 31, 2019. <https://rems.ed.gov>.

NASP. "NASP." Accessed July 31, 2019. <https://www.nasponline.org>.

## 9. Drills

In December 1958, three teachers and 92 children were killed in a fire at Our Lady of the Angels school in Chicago. Exhaustive reviews of the cause of the fire and the immediate response led to sweeping changes in school fire safety nationwide. One of those changes was a marked increase in statutorily required fire drills throughout the school year. The remarkably low rate (approaching zero) of fire-related deaths in schools since 1958 is attributable to many factors, including school design and the adoption of enhanced fire safety equipment and technology. Drills also play a role in this continuing success story.

Following the Columbine school shooting, lockdown drills became a routine part of many schools' emergency operations plans. More recently, an options-based approach is being adopted to allow schools to protect their students based on the unique circumstances of an event. An example of the options-based approach is "Run, Hide, Fight."

The Federal Commission recommends the use of options-based approaches that are age-appropriate.<sup>24</sup> Creating "muscle memory" and clear expectations of everyone's role (teachers, staff, and students) during an emergency are best achieved through the conduct of armed assailant drills on a regular basis throughout the school year. Some schools are alternating fire, weather emergency, and armed assailant drills as permitted or required by state law and school district policies and procedures. It is important to note that many schools are moving away from the use of codes (Code Red, etc.) to command action in emergencies and instead are using "plain language" such as lockdown, secure the building, evacuate.

In its *Guide to Preventing and Responding to School Violence* (IACP 2009), the IACP recommends that schools establish and practice lockdown and evacuation procedures, including where students should go during different types of emergencies.<sup>25</sup> Schools are urged to consider various adverse weather conditions and ways to transport students to designated safe havens away from the school.

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<sup>24</sup> Federal Commission on School Safety, *Final Report*, 146.

<sup>25</sup> IACP, *Guide for Preventing and Responding to School Violence*.

## **Some schools are alternating fire, weather emergency, and armed assailant drills.**

Safe and Sound Schools recommends debrief sessions following all drills to identify challenges encountered and ideas for improvement. Strategies for ensuring successful family reunification should be built into every school's emergency operations plan. NASRO and the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) developed, with input from Safe and Sound Schools, a guide titled *Best Practice Considerations for Schools in Active Shooter and Other Armed Assailant Drills*. To review the guide visit <https://www.nasro.org/cms/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/Best-Practice-Active-Shooter-Drills.pdf>.

# 10. Social Media Monitoring

Adolescents and even elementary school students spend an enormous amount of time online; with 89 percent of 13–17-year-olds reporting they use the internet at least several times a day (and half those reporting they are online “almost constantly”).<sup>26</sup> Young people will sometimes communicate their intent to hurt themselves or others online. Further, according to surveys cited by the Federal Commission, 34 percent of youth reported being cyberbullied in their lifetime.<sup>27</sup> Cyberbullying has been associated with victim self-harm and retaliatory acts.

Defensive social media monitoring, also referred to as social media alerting systems, provide constant online scanning of messages within a geofence<sup>§</sup> around a school or school district to identify threats and at-risk behavior including cyberbullying. Some systems are capable of monitoring beyond a designated geofence.

While the vast majority of social media posts by students and student-to-student online conversations are innocuous, some may portend harm to self or others. These conversations and posts may also convey concerns about school climate and safety.

The COPS Office School Safety Working Group concurs with the Federal Commission’s assessment that these systems, when implemented with strong protocols to safeguard privacy and free speech, can be an effective tool in a comprehensive, multilayered school safety plan. Because identifying threats early is the first crucial step to prevent acts of school violence, these systems should operate in real time.

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<sup>26</sup> Anderson and Jiang, *Teens, Social Media, & Technology*.

<sup>27</sup> Patchin, “New National Bullying and Cyberbullying Data,” cited in Federal Commission, *Final Report*.

<sup>§</sup> Geofencing uses the global positioning system (GPS) or radio frequency identification (RFID) to define a virtual perimeter around a real-world geographic area. (Rouse 2019)

**Social media alerting systems, . . . when implemented with strong protocols to safeguard privacy and free speech, can be an effective tool in a comprehensive, multilayered school safety plan.**

It is recommended that schools and school districts consider employing—resources permitting—real-time social media alerting systems. It is also important for schools and school districts to encourage parents to monitor their children’s social media usage. As with anonymous reporting systems, for social media monitoring to be effective it must be accompanied by strong tracking and accountability measures to ensure follow up on potential threats and linked to BTAM teams.

# Conclusion

The COPS Office School Safety Working Group recognizes and respects the fact that school administrators and law enforcement executives are under constant and tremendous pressure to “do something” to protect our students. And yet, as pointed out by the Federal Commission, there is no user-friendly guide that helps school and law enforcement officials easily wade through the myriad decisions they have to make around policies, training, and acquisitions to protect students.

It is our sincere hope that this guide helps law enforcement and school communities cut through the clutter and noise so they can focus on the most essential protective measures from the perspective of law enforcement thought leaders.

To that end, we offer one final thought:

One of the imperatives the COPS Office School Safety Working Group returned to repeatedly during its deliberations was the need to be able to quickly identify a threat, immediately communicate the threat, and then react in a timely manner to save lives. We encourage law enforcement agencies and school officials to focus on this imperative as they develop and exercise their school safety plans. When our students “see something and say something,” we have to be prepared to act immediately and decisively to prevent the loss of life.



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# About the Participating Organizations

## ASCIA



The **Association of State Criminal Investigative Agencies** is a professional association consisting of the senior executives of the statewide criminal investigative agencies in the United States, both independent bureaus and state police agencies with criminal and other enforcement responsibilities. ASCIA addresses the concerns and issues of its members through information sharing, collaboration, and advocacy while working with other major law enforcement associations on national issues.

## IACLEA



The **International Association of Campus Law Enforcement Administrators** is the largest professional association devoted to excellence in campus public safety and law enforcement with more than 4,200 members. IACLEA's mission is to advance public safety for educational institutions by providing training, research, advocacy, accreditation, education, and professional services.

## IACP



The **International Association of Chiefs of Police** is the world's largest and most influential professional organization for police leaders. With more than 30,000 members in 150 countries, the IACP is a recognized leader in global policing, committed to advancing safer communities through thoughtful, progressive police leadership. The IACP is dedicated to advancing the policing profession through advocacy, research, outreach, and education to provide for safer communities worldwide.

## MCCA



The **Major Cities Chiefs Association** is a professional association of chiefs and sheriffs representing the 69 largest law enforcement agencies in the United States and the nine largest in Canada. The MCCA provides a forum for law enforcement executives to share ideas, experiences, and strategies for addressing the challenges of policing large urban communities.

## MCSA



**Major County Sheriffs of America** is a professional law enforcement association of the largest elected sheriffs' offices in counties or parishes with populations of 500,000 or more. MCSA serves its members through information sharing, education, research, and advocacy.

## NASRO



The **National Association of School Resource Officers** is a professional membership organization serving school-based law enforcement officers, school administrators, and school security and safety professionals working as partners to protect students, faculty, staff, and their school community. With more than 10,000 members, NASRO is the world leader in school-based policing. NASRO developed the “triad” concept of school-based policing, which is designed to ensure safe learning environments, provide valuable resources to school staff members, and foster a positive relationship with students.

## National Police Foundation



The **National Police Foundation's** mission is to advance policing through innovation and science. It is the oldest national nonprofit, nonpartisan, and non-membership organization dedicated to improving the United States' most noble profession: policing. The real-world application of the foundation's research acts as a catalyst for change in American policing by identifying and addressing current and emerging public safety challenges.

## NSA



The **National Sheriffs' Association** is a professional association dedicated to serving the Office of Sheriff and its affiliates through law enforcement education and training and through the provision of general law enforcement informational resources. The more than 20,000 NSA members include the United States' elected sheriffs, deputies, other law enforcement and public safety professionals, and concerned citizens.

# About the COPS Office

The **Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS Office)** is the component of the U.S. Department of Justice responsible for advancing the practice of community policing by the nation's state, local, territorial, and tribal law enforcement agencies through information and grant resources.

Community policing begins with a commitment to building trust and mutual respect between police and communities. It supports public safety by encouraging all stakeholders to work together to address our nation's crime challenges. When police and communities collaborate, they more effectively address underlying issues, change negative behavioral patterns, and allocate resources.

Rather than simply responding to crime, community policing focuses on preventing it through strategic problem-solving approaches based on collaboration. The COPS Office awards grants to hire community policing officers and support the development and testing of innovative policing strategies. COPS Office funding also provides training and technical assistance to community members and local government leaders, as well as all levels of law enforcement.

Since 1994, the COPS Office has invested more than \$14 billion to add community policing officers to the nation's streets, enhance crime fighting technology, support crime prevention initiatives, and provide training and technical assistance to help advance community policing. Other achievements include the following:

- To date, the COPS Office has funded the hiring of approximately 130,000 additional officers by more than 13,000 of the nation's 18,000 law enforcement agencies in both small and large jurisdictions.
- Nearly 700,000 law enforcement personnel, community members, and government leaders have been trained through COPS Office-funded training organizations.
- To date, the COPS Office has distributed more than eight million topic-specific publications, training curricula, white papers, and resource CDs and flash drives.
- The COPS Office also sponsors conferences, round tables, and other forums focused on issues critical to law enforcement.

COPS Office information resources, covering a wide range of community policing topics such as school and campus safety, violent crime, and officer safety and wellness, can be downloaded via the COPS Office's home page, [www.cops.usdoj.gov](http://www.cops.usdoj.gov). This website is also the grant application portal, providing access to online application forms.





The COPS Office School Safety Working Group, which is composed of representatives from eight national law enforcement organizations, has identified 10 essential actions that can be taken by schools, school districts, and law enforcement agencies to help prevent critical incidents involving the loss of life or injuries in our nation's schools and to respond rapidly and effectively when incidents do occur. These actions are applicable to school shootings as well as to other areas of school safety, including natural disasters and traumatic events such as student suicide. Adopting policies and practices based on the recommendations in this publication can help make school communities safer and save lives.



**COPS**  
*Community Oriented Policing Services*  
**U.S. Department of Justice**

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To obtain details about COPS Office programs, call  
the COPS Office Response Center at 800-421-6770.

Visit the COPS Office online at [www.cops.usdoj.gov](http://www.cops.usdoj.gov).

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