

Protecting the Lives and Safety of Students in Our Schools

Preparedness, Violence Prevention and
Situational Awareness for K-12 Learning Facilities

A Regroup Mass Notification Guide Book



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Introduction

Gun violence in American schools has risen dramatically over the years. On May 24, 2002, 19 children and 2 adults were killed and another 16 injured in a mass shooting at Robb Elementary School in Uvalde, Texas. This was the deadliest school shooting since the Sandy Hook Elementary shooting in 2012 that killed 26 students and adults in Newtown, Connecticut.¹

As of mid-June, there were 27 school shootings with injuries or deaths recorded for 2022. These numbers include 27 fatalities and 56 injuries with the majority of events taking place in elementary or middle school environments.

Although school shootings may seem like a relatively new phenomenon in American history, incidents of these violent events date back as early as the 1700s.² However, more modern firearms and rifles have turned school shootings into mass casualty events with the majority of victims being minor children and their educators.

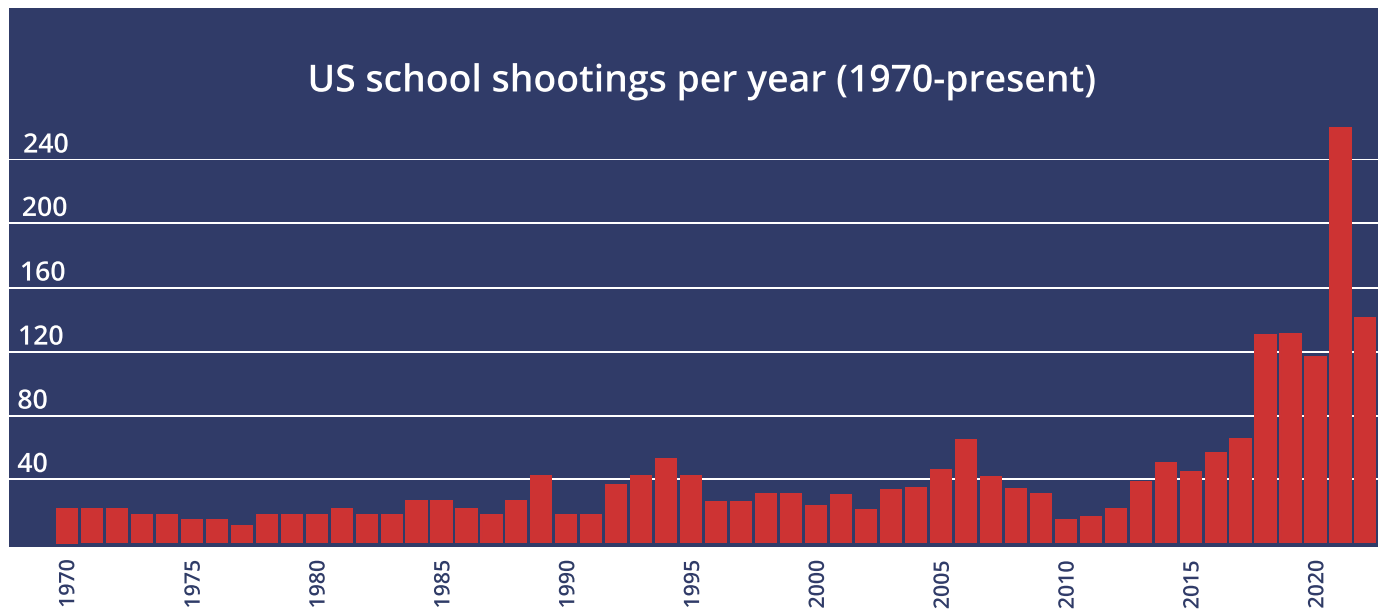
Virtually all school districts in the United States have incorporated crisis and emergency management procedures for educational facilities that incorporate personnel training, relationships with local law enforcement and threat assessment guidelines. However, the Uvalde event has drawn criticism of school officials and local law enforcement with many parents and community members calling for strengthened procedures and protocols.

In response, the United States lower house passed new legislation that would ban the sale of semi-automatic rifles to US citizens under the age of 21. Other measures and bans were also introduced into the legislation that, as of this writing, is predicted to fail in the United States Senate. Whatever the outcome, it is ultimately the best practices of each school that will ensure safety for students and staff.



Some Sobering Statistics

School shootings in the United States spiked dramatically after 2017. According to the Center for Homeland Defense and Security, there have been **1,322 individual shootings** since 1970 which have resulted in **426 fatalities** and **1,225 injuries**, as of this writing.³



In the United States, more densely populated states and communities saw the most frequent occurrences of gun violence in schools — even in states with tighter restrictions on firearm ownership.

By state, California has had the greatest number of school shooting incidents with 214 recorded since 1970. These have resulted in 85 deaths.

Texas has had the second highest number of shooting incidents with 176 in total and 74 deaths, followed by Florida with 120 incidents and 48 killed.

Non-weapon school violence and other behavioral incidents also serve to create serious concerns for school districts and local communities.

During the 2017–18 school year, an estimated 962,300 violent incidents and 476,100 nonviolent incidents occurred in U.S. public schools nationwide. 72% of schools reported having at least one violent incident, and 65% reported having at least one non-violent incident.

Additionally, roughly 66% of schools reported at least one physical attack or fight without a weapon.⁴

What is and is not Being Done

In 2021, the United States lower house introduced H.R.5428 — School Shooting Safety and Preparedness Act.⁵ This act increased reporting requirements of school shooting events by the Secretary of Education, Attorney General and Secretary of Health and Human Services. Very specific reporting, including clear statistics, would be just one measure of the legislation, if passed.

The bill also addresses safety and prevention reporting regulations that would allow the National Center for Education Statistics to collect data on each school's:



Physical security measures including buildings and interiors designed to protect occupants



Other measures to avert and restrict violence



A communication plan with local law enforcement



A response plan that includes coordination with law enforcement, fire departments and hospitals



Active shooter response plans to include an alert system that notifies students, faculty, parents or legal guardians



Trauma response plans

As this new legislation is being drafted at a national level and dependent on the cooperation of federal agencies and administrations, it is reasonable to believe that roll-out times and state-level compliance will not happen overnight. It's also important to understand that each state, county or parish and district may have slightly differing regulations and guidelines on handling violent threats in the educational environment.

Following the mass shooting at Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida in 2018, the Florida legislature passed Public Safety Act MSDHSPSA, SB-7026. This legislation enabled the Governor of the State of Florida to investigate the Parkland tragedy through an appointment commission. The final commission report noted that **"...there is not a standard threat assessment process in Florida and there is no known automated threat assessment system known to the commission."**

What Schools and Communities Can Do

Until a more uniform, national approach to hardening schools against violent events and active shooters, more immediate remedies will require the cooperation of each school and their faculty and parents.

A greater focus on prevention is called for and this can only be accomplished by assessing risks, identifying weaknesses, training students, staff and parents and a communication plan that quickly and effectively alerts all involved when a crisis presents itself.

Steps for Preventing Violence in Schools

According to the National Threat Assessment Center, the ideal goal of threat assessment is to identify potential risks and intervention strategies in order to successfully mitigate crises and prevent violence. At minimum, every school administration should consider the following steps to ensuring a safer learning environment for students and staff:

- 1 Establish threat assessment and response teams within the school
- 2 Identify potential weaknesses - structures, safety procedures
- 3 Create a centralized alerting and reporting protocol
- 4 Create a playbook for emergency response procedures with attention to specific scenarios (school violence, active shooter events)
- 5 Schedule regular drills for students and faculty as well as training exercises for appropriate staff members
- 6 Disseminate all safety and security measures to parents, legal guardians, law enforcement and fire departments
- 7 Plan annual review and reporting of all safety and security plans

Considerations for Students at Risk

School districts and administrators have their work cut out for them when it comes to assessing weaknesses in their security and safety plans. Exacerbating this potentially overwhelming responsibility is the state of mental health in the United States — a clear contributor to violence in schools. Studies from the American Counseling Association indicate:



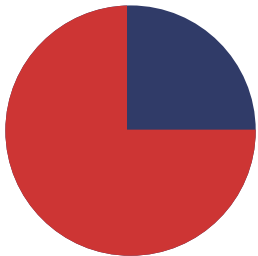
1 in 5 children

under the age of 18 have a diagnosable mental disorder



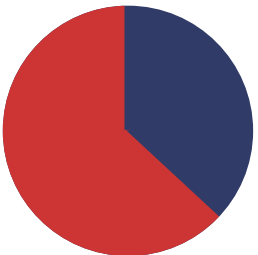
1 in 10 children

under the age of 18 has a serious mental health disorder



75%

of students struggling with mental health issues do not receive treatment or services



61%

of suspects in school violence crimes had a documented history of symptoms of extreme depression prior to an attack

Few public schools will have the budgetary ability to focus on behavioral or mental health of their students, and there appears to be no immediate help on the horizon. It is, therefore, an important consideration of school administrators and security personnel to monitor and communicate appropriately with parents and guardians when a student seems at risk.

Partnering with Parents and Guardians

Communicating with parents and guardians is a powerful tool for school administrators and security professionals for keeping the learning environment safe and productive for students — even in lower grades. Considering many parents may be burdened with heavy work schedules, electronic communications of safety and emergency response plans makes sense practically and financially.

Establishing a communication bridge between schools and parents or guardians serves two critical functions:

- ✓ Clearly communicates school safety practices and policies
- ✓ Encourages involvement and sense of community in support of the school

Using email or mass notification tools, school administrators can bolster school safety practices and overall transparency by disseminating information to parents and guardians on a planned schedule and when issues arise. Some considerations for routine communications may include:

- ✓ Parent/teacher meeting or PTA meeting schedules and invitations
- ✓ Notice of entry to school requirements
- ✓ Updates to general policies and school safety policies
- ✓ Calls for event volunteers

Utilizing this concept, schools can also alert parents to critical events as they evolve. A mass notification system is the best tool for use in alerting parents in the event of an emergency:

- ✓ Suspicious activity near the school or campus
- ✓ Potential viral or chemical exposure
- ✓ Active shooter event
- ✓ Violent event
- ✓ Lockdown events
- ✓ All-clear notifications

Preparedness Schools, Students and Faculty

Hardening schools against threats of violence requires buy-in from administrators, faculty, parents and guardians, local officials and students. Because of the unpredictability of violent attacks on schools, basic safety standards are simply not enough. Instead, consultation with local law enforcement, safety officials and others makes a good starting point in examining and strengthening a school's preparedness plan.

Once some suggested direction is received at the district and administrative levels, schools can better hone their preparedness and response plans. Further, regular review of safety practices is necessary to ensure a continued environment of safe learning for students and staff.

Some important considerations that should be regularly reviewed include:

- ☐ Are entrances and exits clearly marked and secured?
- ☐ Do parents understand access policies?
- ☐ Are there sufficient cameras and other monitoring technologies in place?
- ☐ Can individual classrooms be secured quickly?
- ☐ Are door locks functioning properly?
- ☐ Do classroom doors and windows have coverings?
- ☐ Are there first aid supplies available in each classroom?
- ☐ Are there fire extinguishers in all classrooms and common areas?
- ☐ Are resource officers greeting students at entrances?
- ☐ Are regular drills being conducted?
- ☐ Are evacuation and lockdown procedures clear and communicated?
- ☐ Do teachers have access to communication devices at all times?
- ☐ Are students with disabilities accommodated in evacuation or lockdown circumstances?
- ☐ Are there sufficient resource officers and medical professionals on staff?
- ☐ Are students and staff easily accounted for on any given day?
- ☐ Is there an emergency alert or notification system in place?

The Role of Communication in School Safety

Unlike the circumstances of decades past, today's schools can gain access to powerful communication tools to alert others of emergencies and violent attacks. A mass notification system is likely the easiest and most effective way to communicate during a crisis and to enable two-way communication with faculty members during an emergency.

There are a number of advantages to adding a mass notification platform to a school's safety plan:

- ✔ Immediate delivery of text/SMS and push notifications in the event of an emergency
- ✔ Typically unaffected by power outages or cellular tower interruptions
- ✔ Able to target specific groups (administrators, resource officers, law enforcement)
- ✔ Enables two-way communications via mobile devices to allow for updates and instructions
- ✔ Mobile users can send alerts or calls for help silently (virtual panic button)
- ✔ More discreet than two-way radio communications for security personnel
- ✔ Can be used network-wide to update parents and guardians

Any school emergency preparedness or violent prevention plan can be greatly improved with an accompanying communication plan and the use of mass notification. Mass notification requires very little in the way of onboarding or training and is typically as simple to use as texting. However, it has the ability to target the right people when moments count and is a recommended tool for school safety practices and emergency response.



Conclusion

It is clear from history, and recent events alike, that schools in the United States remain risk centers for mass casualty attacks. While legislation to address this pressing national issue is a lengthy and ongoing process, school districts and administrators can take certain initiatives to help secure their schools, students and personnel.

It is essential to have a well thought out safety plan in place. To accomplish the ultimate goal of school safety, a successful plan requires support from faculty, parents and students. It must identify areas in need of improvement, actionable items, responsible parties and be the role parents play in helping to preserve a healthy, safe learning environment. Consider:

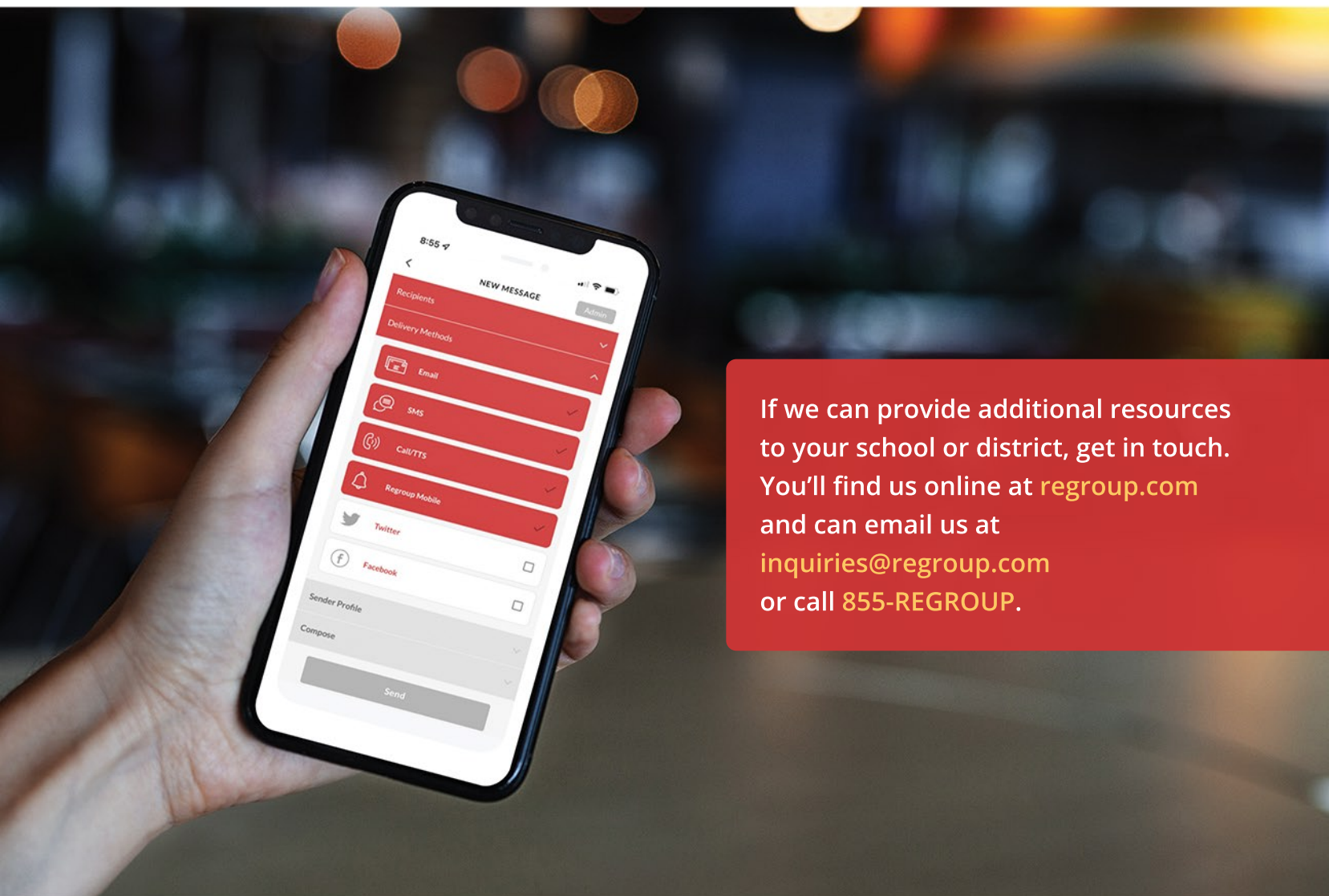
- ✔ Calling on local law enforcement and other consultants for guidance
- ✔ Scheduling regular drills
- ✔ Collaborating with parents on individual student needs
- ✔ Training all faculty and staff in first aid, emergency response and response to violent events

With open communication, collaboration and continual steps for improvement, schools can mitigate the risks of active shooter and other violent scenarios in their facilities and keep their schools and students safe.



Who We Are

Since 2006, Regroup Mass Notification has served schools and universities with mass alerts for emergencies and communication tools for routine use. We support hundreds of educational facilities throughout the United States and offer technologies and solutions that save lives.



If we can provide additional resources to your school or district, get in touch. You'll find us online at regroup.com and can email us at inquiries@regroup.com or call 855-REGROUP.



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