

School Active Shooter Drills

Mitigating Risks to Mental, Emotional, and Behavioral Health

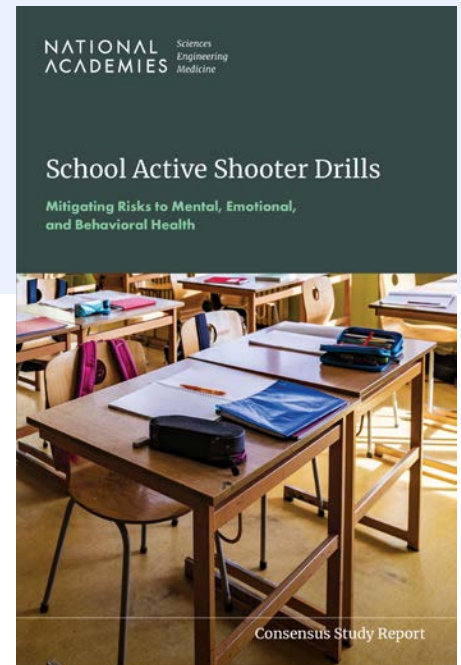
INTRODUCTION

In response to growing concern about the psychological toll of school active shooter drills, Congress directed the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine to examine their effects on students' and staff members' mental, emotional, and behavioral health. While these drills are intended to enhance emergency preparedness and safety, research on their outcomes is sparse and there are few recognized standards guiding implementation

Conducted by a committee of experts with expertise in education, school safety, public health, pediatrics, child and adolescent development, psychiatry, psychology, developmental neuroscience, public policy, and criminology, the study evaluates available evidence, identifies practices likely to cause harm, and offers evidence-informed strategies for developmentally appropriate emergency preparedness. The report also addresses broader school security measures, such as the presence of police and other security personnel, locked doors, and metal detectors, and their implications for school climate and student wellbeing. Its findings aim to support policymakers, educators, families, and communities in fostering safe and supportive school environments.

KEY FINDINGS

Active shooter drills are now routine in U.S. schools: 95% of public K-12 schools conduct them, and many states mandate their use. However, schools vary widely in how drills are defined, implemented, and communicated, with little guidance on minimizing potential harms to mental, emotional, and behavioral health. Some drills use



developmentally appropriate, low-intensity protocols, while others incorporate high-sensorial simulations, unannounced scenarios, or even deception. This diversity and inconsistency complicate efforts to evaluate drill outcomes and risks.

The available research on the effects of school active shooter drills shows mixed findings. Some students report feeling more prepared after drills, but others—particularly those with previous trauma, anxiety, or other vulnerabilities—may report fear, confusion, or emotional distress. Reactions vary by age, experience, identity, and implementation strategy. Preparedness efforts are best situated within a positive school climate, attuned to the needs of the school community and the developmental stages of students.

Importantly, students with disabilities, multilingual learners, and individuals with other functional and access needs often lack the necessary supports and accommodations to participate in drills safely and effectively. Practices do not consistently reflect trauma-informed or inclusive planning.

Educators and other school staff report experiencing emotional burden and uncertainty, particularly when they are not informed about drills in advance or are not provided training or resources to support students' wellbeing. Equipping adults with the skills and support to remain calm and emotionally regulated during emergencies enhances their ability to help students do the same.

The evidence base is thin, and most studies use self-reported surveys and assess only short-term effects. Few studies examine the long-term consequences of repeated exposure, and even fewer evaluate the interaction of drills with other security measures that may be used in schools. Building the evidence base is a critical need and can help to inform interventions that equip students and staff to respond to emergencies while minimizing risks to their mental, emotional, and behavioral health.

The Committee concludes that the risks of harm to the mental, emotional, and behavioral health of students

and staff are real and should not be ignored—but that thoughtful, evidence-informed planning can mitigate these risks. Schools can integrate active shooter drill practices with broader strategies that promote a positive school climate, emergency preparedness, and mental health support. Practices that are high-intensity, unannounced, or use deception should be avoided entirely.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The committee offers a series of action-oriented recommendations aimed at policymakers, school leaders, educators, and federal agencies:

- **Design trauma-informed, developmentally appropriate drills.** Schools should assess the appropriate level of practice for students and evaluate whether specific practices are suitable for the school setting, broader school environment, and community context.
- **Ban high-sensorial and deceptive practices.** State legislatures and local districts should prohibit drills that simulate realistic attacks or that use deception. These practices pose significant risks and offer little added preparedness benefit.
- **Issue national guidelines for best practices.** Federal agencies, including the Departments of Education, Health and Human Services, and Homeland Security, should release coordinated guidance rooted in child development, trauma-informed practices, and mental health research.
- **Fund research and build data systems.** Philanthropic organizations, federal agencies, and research institutions should invest in studies examining the impacts of drills and school security measures. National surveys should include indicators of mental, emotional, and behavioral health outcomes and school climate.
- **Train and support school staff.** Educators, school-based health professionals, and law enforcement officers who work in schools should receive training

in developmentally appropriate and trauma-informed care, mental health first aid, and inclusive emergency preparedness. Law enforcement officers assigned to schools must be prepared to work with children in developmentally appropriate ways.

- **Ensure accessibility and equity.** Students with disabilities and functional and access needs must be included in emergency planning and drills. Schools should provide language supports and accommodations as required by federal law, and states should issue clear policy guidance to ensure compliance.
- **Increase access to mental health resources.** Schools should engage school-based mental health professionals to monitor students' wellbeing during and after drills and provide mental health support tailored to students' needs and experiences.

- **Provide sustainable funding.** Federal, state, and local governments must ensure that schools have the resources, personnel, training, and infrastructure necessary to implement drills safely and maintain a positive school climate.

THE PATH FORWARD

There is no one-size-fits-all strategy for school safety, but there are clear principles that can guide the implementation of practices that support the mental, emotional, and behavioral health of students and school staff. A positive school climate, inclusive emergency planning, and access to mental health supports are foundational to any preparedness effort. While research on the long-term impacts of school active shooter drills on mental, emotional, and behavioral health outcomes remains sparse, the committee underscores that the absence of conclusive data is not a reason for inaction. Schools can still move forward drawing on strategies that reflect the best available science, elevate the voices of students and staff, and protect the wellbeing of the school community.

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FOR MORE INFORMATION

This Highlights was prepared by National Academies' staff based on the Consensus Study Report *School Active Shooter Drills: Mitigating Risks to Mental, Emotional, and Behavioral Health* (2025).

To read the full report, visit <https://nap.nationalacademies.org/catalog/29105>.

Division of Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education

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