Creating Safe Schools

Guided by a comprehensive school safety plan, we encourage a combination of prevention, point of immediate response, and recovery strategies to reduce the likelihood of violence occurring, mitigate the effect of violent incidents when they do occur, and attend to community needs following violence, respectively. This plan should be put together by a multidisciplinary team based on the best available evidence-based strategies (1) with input from the school community and evaluated systematically. (2)

EVIDENCE BASE FOR SCHOOL SAFETY STRATEGIES

The evidence base for school safety strategies is, unfortunately, mixed and underdeveloped. Prevention strategies have the strongest evidence supporting their implementation and efficacy, followed by work focused on recovery strategies, while time-of-incident strategies have the greatest need for developing evidence and recommendations for best practices.

School safety strategies with **clear and consistent evidence bases** and established best practices:
- School climate, social emotional learning, and anti-bullying programs
- Threat assessment (3) and related screening programs
- Restorative practices/non-exclusionary discipline
- Trauma-informed responses (4) and resilience orientation
- Non-remedial after school and youth empowerment programs (5)

School safety strategies with **developing evidence bases** with need for clearer guidance related to best practices (Note: this doesn't mean that these strategies will not be evidence-based once more data are available):
- Lateral surveillance (i.e., reporting systems (6); Mental Health First Aid)
- Active shooter training and other lockdown drills (7)
- School resource officers (8) (SROs)
- Door lock policies/signage/school-focused Crime Prevention through Environmental Design (9)
- Coordination with law enforcement/first responders
- Extreme Risk Protection Orders (ERPOs) - ERPO laws are largely considered to be a viable prevention strategy. Studies have shown that ERPOs are being used in response to mass shooting threats.

School safety strategies with **limited or no evidence base** and no current evidence for best practice recommendations:
- Video cameras/metal detectors/other target hardening measures
- Stop the Bleed/hemorrhage control training
- Armed teachers/staff/security personnel (non-SROs)
- Technology-aided identification/monitoring

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MARCH 2023

EVIDENCE BASE FOR SOFTENING & HARDENING SCHOOLS

***Softening*, *hardening*, and *assessment & response approaches* can be complimentary when implemented in a thoughtful, developmentally mindful way.**

School softening:

a set of activities focused on social-emotional and psychological aspects of school safety.

School hardening:

physical changes to school environments to deter violence offending.

Assessment & response:

methods for idenitfying students at risk of harming themselves or others and identifying appropriate plans to deter the behavior.

The evidence for school softening and assessment strategies is better established than that for hardening strategies. Whereas most evidence supporting softening and assessment strategies comes from research in education and related fields, the implementation and efficacy of hardening strategies must be extrapolated from justice disciplines (e.g., criminology) which may or may not have schools in mind, or follow intuition as in the case of locked door policies. Based on existing evidence:

1. ***Softening techniques are, to date, the most evidence-based strategies showing effectiveness for preventing school violence.*** Most softening techniques focus on upstream (i.e., primary) prevention and promoting positive environments where violence is not necessary for defense, retaliation, grievance resolution, or self-harm.

2. ***Hardening strategies should be developmentally informed and paired with communication about their use.*** A key concern rising from the limited research on hardening strategies is the negative effect they can have on students' psychological well-being. Researchers report that inconsistent and uninformed implementation can create feelings of stress or anxiety, perceived insecurity, trigger trauma, and detract from learning.

3. ***Softening and hardening strategies should be approached with a lens of equity.*** Hardening strategies are disproportionately implemented in schools with larger racial/ethnic minority populations.[12-14]

4. ***The field needs more research on the implementation and efficacy of hardening strategies.*** Conducting research related to hardening strategies is challenging; however, it is extremely important to do, as understanding the implementation and efficacy of hardening strategies (i.e., establishing an evidence base) is necessary before encouraging widespread use.

5. ***Assessment & reporting strategies blend features of both softening and hardening strategies and provide avenues to disrupt pathways to violence and retain students in their school communities.*** When implemented with fidelity, assessment & reporting strategies are shown to: avert serious incidents of violence, provide critical services to students in need, and reduce disciplinary disparities in students at the highest risk for suspension or expulsion.

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