A photograph of a young couple embracing at a candlelight vigil. The woman is resting her head on the man's shoulder. They are both holding lit candles. The man has a red ribbon pinned to his shirt. The scene is dimly lit, with the primary light source being the candles, creating a somber and intimate atmosphere.

THE TRUTH ABOUT SCHOOL SHOOTINGS

**GIFFORDS
LAW CENTER**

TO PREVENT GUN VIOLENCE

giffordslawcenter.org

INTRODUCTION

On February 14, 2018, survivors of the horrific school shooting in Parkland, Florida, emerged from bullet-ridden classrooms and thrust gun violence into the national spotlight. The heightened focus on the school shooting epidemic raised important questions about the damage these shootings inflict on our nation's youth and how they can best be prevented.

As the student activists called for accountability and action, the gun lobby spread dangerous myths that downplay the role of guns in gun violence. Five of these myths have been repeated time and time again:

MYTH 1 School shootings are just a fact of life.

MYTH 2 Nothing can be done to prevent school shootings.

MYTH 3 Schools need armed teachers to respond to school shootings.

MYTH 4 School shootings are largely caused by mental health issues.

MYTH 5 Children are most likely to experience gun violence at school.

These myths were reinforced in a December 2018 report on school safety released by the Trump administration. This report glosses over gun safety laws and instead proposes a number of “safety” policies that may actually put students in greater danger.

Every American can agree that children should go to school to learn—not to crouch under desks and text their parents goodbye. Our report seeks to dispel dangerous myths about school shootings and offers concrete recommendations for evidence-based policies that will ensure all of our students make it safely home from school.

From top: Chicago activist Armaria Broyles speaks at the Chicago Peace Rally; presidential candidate Donald Trump addresses the NRA 2016 convention; students protest at the March for Our Lives in Washington DC; activists march on the Utah Capitol.



MYTH 1

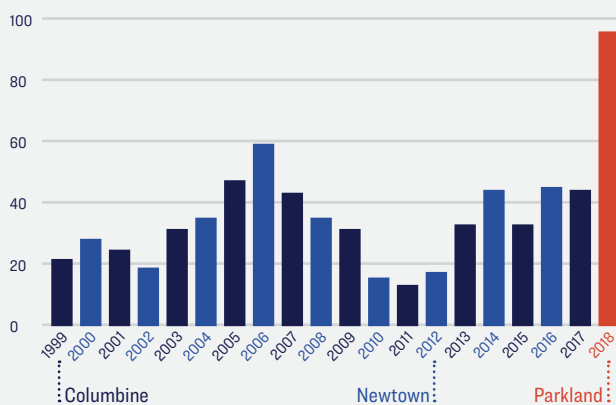
School shootings are just a fact of life.

WE CAN NEVER ACCEPT SCHOOL SHOOTINGS AS THE NEW NORMAL

After the 2018 shooting at Santa Fe High School, student Paige Curry told reporters, “It’s been happening everywhere. I always kind of felt like eventually it was going to happen here too.” It’s no wonder students feel like school shootings are inevitable—they’re more common now than ever before. But that doesn’t mean we should accept them as normal.

GUN INCIDENTS AT SCHOOLS ON THE RISE

Gun violence in schools has been traumatizing students in schools for more than 20 years, but in 2018, these incidents increased at an unprecedented rate.



Source: Center for Homeland Defense and Security, US Naval Postgraduate School

A generation of students has been raised to fear school shootings, and for good reason. The problem is only getting worse. In 2018—a year in which we experienced two of the deadliest school shootings in recent history—there were more incidents of gun violence and more gun deaths at schools than any other year on record.¹ A student’s chance of dying in a school shooting reached its highest level in at least 25 years.² In no other developed nation is the threat of gun violence in schools so high.

Given how commonplace gun violence and school shootings are in America, it’s no wonder that 60% of teenagers say they are worried about a shooting happening at their school.³

In fact, polling data shows that students now fear school shootings more than fitting in or facing peer pressure.⁴

Our children deserve better. Rather than accepting school shootings as the price of freedom, we must take action to protect our kids.



60% OF TEENS SAY THEY ARE WORRIED ABOUT A SHOOTING HAPPENING AT THEIR SCHOOL



A student is comforted after the shooting at Santa Fe High School in May 2018, in which 10 people died and 13 were wounded.

MYTH 2

Nothing can be done to prevent school shootings.

WITH THE RIGHT LAWS, WE CAN PREVENT SCHOOL SHOOTINGS

The gun lobby often claims that school shootings can't be prevented. We know that gun laws can prevent shootings and save lives—but only when our leaders have the courage to enact them.

CHILD ACCESS PREVENTION LAWS

Firearms left unsecured in the home are a major source of guns used in school shootings.¹ Given that students and people under age 18 disproportionately perpetrate school shootings,² it is crucial to

implement policies that prevent children from accessing guns. Child access prevention (CAP) laws encourage safe storage of firearms by holding adults accountable when kids gain access to their guns. Evidence shows these laws work

to prevent unauthorized firearm access. States that have implemented these laws have seen reductions in both youth suicides and unintentional injuries.³

EXTREME RISK PROTECTION ORDERS

Most mass shooters exhibit an average of four to five dangerous warning signs of their violent intentions.⁵ In many cases, people who knew a shooter observed these signs, but there was no clear legal process to restrict firearm access.⁶ Extreme risk protection order (ERPO) laws allow family members and law enforcement to petition a court to temporarily

disarm individuals at elevated risk of harming themselves or others. These laws are already being used to prevent school shootings. In the first three months following Maryland's implementation of an ERPO law, four people who made threats against schools were disarmed.⁷

RAISING THE MINIMUM AGE

The shooters in the two deadliest school shootings—Newtown and Parkland—were too young to buy beer but old enough to purchase AR-15-style rifles. In fact, from 2009 to 2018, 18-to-20-year-olds comprised 36% of adult shooters involved in gun incidents at schools.⁸ Adults in this age range also account for a disproportionate number of all gun homicide offenders.⁹ Raising the minimum age to purchase semiautomatic rifles, or long guns generally, would help to prevent individuals at increased risk of violence from accessing dangerous weapons that could be used in school shootings.

ERPO LAWS GAINED TREMENDOUS TRACTION IN 2018. MORE STATES SHOULD PASS THESE LIFESAVING LAWS.

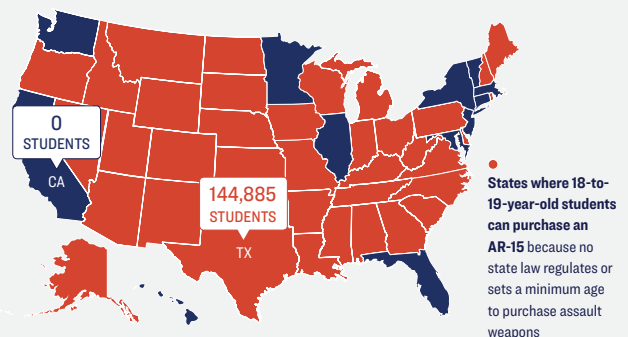
Source: Giffords Law Center



Two-thirds of students who carried out targeted gun attacks at schools obtained guns from their homes.⁴

ALMOST 1 MILLION HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS CAN LEGALLY PURCHASE AN AR-15, THE GUN USED IN 6 OF THE 10 DEADLIEST MASS SHOOTINGS

Source: Giffords Law Center, US Census Bureau, and Department of Education¹⁰



MYTH 3

Schools need armed teachers to respond to school shootings.

ARMING TEACHERS WILL MAKE SCHOOLS MORE DANGEROUS, NOT LESS

The Trump administration's school safety commission suggested that arming teachers will protect students. But decades of public health research strongly indicates that arming teachers will not prevent violence in schools. In fact, this research suggests that armed teachers would likely increase, rather than decrease, students' exposure to gun violence in schools.

Studies have shown that guns do not protect those who possess them from being shot¹ and that the risks associated with gun access vastly outweigh the likelihood of self-defense use.² Individuals successfully defend themselves with a gun in less than one percent of crimes,³ but the presence of guns in the home significantly increases the risk of gun death for all household members.⁴

The risks associated with introducing firearms into schools would almost certainly be even higher. In fact, a systematic review of publicly reported incidents involving guns on school campuses details numerous incidents where a gun was mishandled or improperly fired by armed adults at schools.⁵

> **The majority of incidents involve cases where adults' firearms were left accessible to students.**⁶ Security guards left weapons unattended in bathrooms or bags, where they were picked up and handled by students.⁷ In some cases, students accessed or fired weapons that were still holstered.⁸

> **In some cases, authorized adults unintentionally fired duty weapons.** For instance, during a gun safety demonstration, a teacher unintentionally fired a gun in class, resulting in injury to a student.⁹

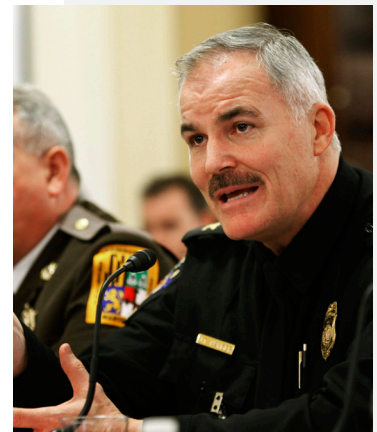
> **Other incidents show that armed adults, in rare cases, reach for guns in times of personal stress or conflict**—in some cases using weapons to attempt suicide at school.¹⁰

The findings of the review document the many ways in which guns brought onto premises to prevent violence may actually increase risk. Because teachers will in nearly all cases have less formal firearms safety training than school resource officers, who were involved in the majority of incidents in the review, these events would almost certainly be even more common if teachers were armed.

"The more guns that are coming into the equation, the more volatility and the more risk there is of somebody getting hurt."

J. Thomas Manger, former president of the Major Cities Chiefs Association and police chief in Montgomery County, Maryland

Source: Mother Jones



Law enforcement officers agree—arming teachers won't keep kids safe. The presence of more guns during a school shooting will make it difficult for officers to identify the shooter, rendering the situation more dangerous.

STRONG OPPOSITION TO ARMING TEACHERS

Most teens, teachers, and parents oppose arming teachers.



7 OUT OF 10 TEENAGERS



8 OUT OF 10 TEACHERS



7 OUT OF 10 PARENTS

Source: The Washington Post, Teach Plus

MYTH 4

School shootings are largely caused by mental health issues.

SCHOOL SHOOTINGS ARE CAUSING A MENTAL HEALTH CRISIS

After many school shootings, the gun lobby tries to blame mental health. This rhetoric both distracts from the real problem—easy access to guns—and ignores the mental health crises and debilitating trauma these shootings create.

The majority of the recommendations put forth by the Federal Commission on School Safety concern identifying and managing mental health issues.¹ Although improving access to mental health services is important and would certainly benefit many Americans, research suggests that it will have little impact on preventing interpersonal gun violence.² In fact, the vast majority of people with mental illness are not more violent than the general population.³

Research is clear, however, on the negative mental health consequences of living in a country where school shootings are so common. Children who experience school shootings can suffer severe anxiety and debilitating trauma, the consequences of which can persist into adulthood.⁴ Even students who never hear gunfire but who are forced to write

farewell messages to their families while

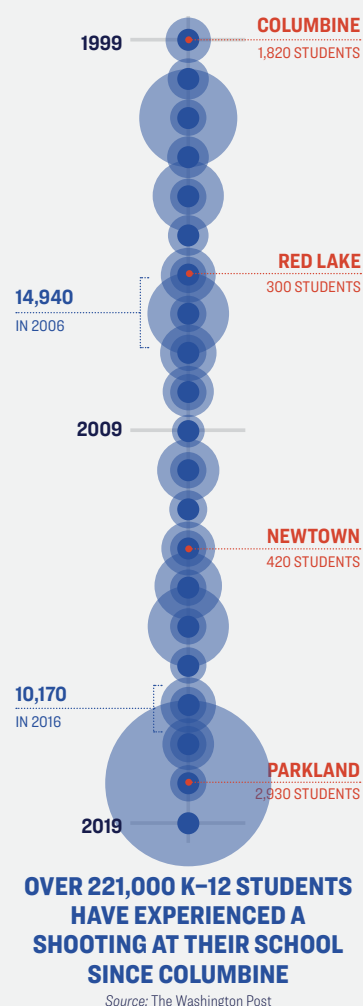
hunkered underneath a desk during a lockdown can be severely traumatized.⁵

The only way to prevent this trauma is to prevent school shootings. To do that,

we need to focus on what actually works: evidence-based gun safety laws.

Even if we could cure all mental illness, violence would only decrease by about 4%.⁶

4.1
MILLION
students endured
at least one
lockdown during
the 2017-2018
school year.



The NRA often characterizes school shootings as a “failure of America’s mental health system” to distract from the obvious relationship between gun availability and gun deaths.⁷



EXPOSURE TO GUN VIOLENCE TRIGGERS A CHAIN OF TRAUMA THAT CAN LAST A LIFETIME



Limited Potential
Exposure to school shootings decreases the academic performance of students, which can impact college enrollment and future earnings.



Poor Health
Exposure to school shootings can cause chronic stress, the effects of which can manifest as serious, life-threatening health conditions in adulthood.



Violent Tendencies
Children exposed to violence are more likely to become aggressive or violent—either against themselves or others—perpetuating the cycle of violence.

MYTH 5

Children are most likely to experience gun violence at school.

SCHOOL SHOOTINGS ARE JUST THE TIP OF THE ICEBERG

School shootings comprise only a fraction of the gun violence affecting America's youth. Every day, children and teens fall victim to gun violence in their homes and communities. And every year, three million children witness gun violence.¹ It's critical to take steps to protect kids both inside and outside of schools.

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

Nearly a third of gun homicides of young children occur in the context of domestic violence,² and a substantial number of mass shootings—which disproportionately involve child victims—are related to domestic violence.³ Thousands of children

Guns are used in more than half of all intimate partner homicides.⁶

lose their mothers in intimate partner homicides each year. The link between guns and domestic violence couldn't be clearer: access to a gun in a domestic violence situation makes it five times more likely that a woman will be killed.⁴ Laws that separate domestic abusers from guns are essential to protecting both women and children. Studies have shown that such laws can reduce intimate partner homicides committed with guns by as much as 16%.⁵

UNINTENTIONAL SHOOTINGS AND YOUTH SUICIDES

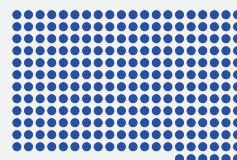
4.6 million children live in homes with unsecured, loaded firearms.⁷ These guns pose a clear risk to the safety of children. Many of the guns children use in unintentional shootings and teen suicides are taken from their homes.⁸ That's why it's crucial that we prevent children from accessing guns by enacting laws that require safe storage and

hold adults accountable when kids gain access to their guns. Incentivizing the development of gun safety technology, like fingerprint trigger locks and biometric gun safes, can also prevent unauthorized gun access.

URBAN GUN VIOLENCE

For children growing up in underserved communities of color in American cities, gun violence can be a daily and even hourly occurrence. At least 40% of children in high-violence urban neighborhoods have witnessed a shooting,⁹ and black children are 10 times more likely than white children to be fatally shot by a gun.¹⁰ The persistent threat of gun violence also contributes to elevated rates of PTSD among children in these high-violence neighborhoods.¹¹ Evidence-based programs that interrupt the cycle of violence result in quick and dramatic reductions in shootings in cities—sometimes by up to 60%.¹²

FOR EVERY CHILD
KILLED IN A GUN
HOMICIDE AT SCHOOL—



246 DIE BY GUN SUICIDE



156 ARE KILLED
IN COMMUNITY
SHOOTINGS



42 ARE KILLED IN
DOMESTIC VIOLENCE
SHOOTINGS



37 ARE KILLED IN
UNINTENTIONAL
SHOOTINGS

Calculated by Giffords Law Center
using data from CDC WISQARS,
American Academy of Pediatrics,
and The Washington Post.¹³

GUN HOMICIDES ARE THE LEADING CAUSE OF DEATH FOR BLACK CHILDREN AND TEENS

Source: CDC WISQARS

BLACK CHILDREN COMPRISE

17% OF THE POPULATION UNDER AGE 18

60% OF CHILD GUN HOMICIDE VICTIMS



CONCLUSION

School shootings are a uniquely American crisis. They exact a heavy toll on our students, both in lives lost and in psychological trauma experienced by survivors. In the face of federal inaction, many states have taken the initiative to help prevent these tragedies. In the year following the Parkland massacre, 67 gun safety laws were enacted in 26 states and DC.

Post-Parkland student activism has helped give legislators nationwide the courage to stand up to the gun lobby's bullying and fearmongering, and pass lifesaving gun laws. Now it's time to stand up to dangerous myths perpetuated by the gun lobby about how to prevent school shootings. The answer to our nation's gun violence crisis is not more guns, and the answer to America's school shootings crisis is not arming teachers.

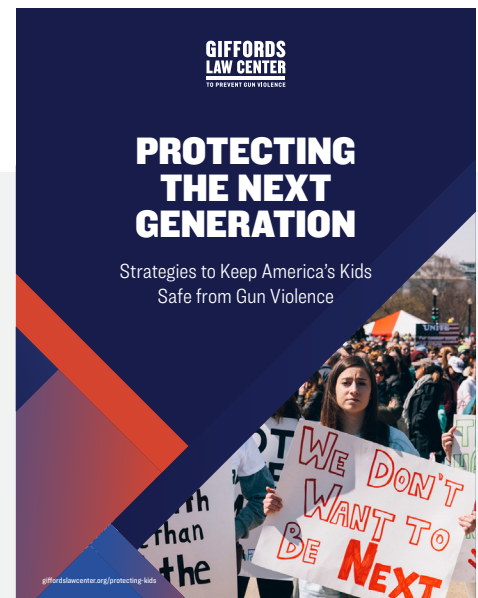
We do not—and should not—have to accept school shootings as the new normal. We shouldn't have to live in a country where preschoolers are taught to crouch under desks during active shooter drills, where parents suffer through the fear and heartbreak of receiving goodbye texts from their teenagers. We can build a safer America by arming legislators with the facts instead of gun lobby talking points and urging them to pass the gun safety laws that will keep our children safe.

To leverage the legal and policy acumen of our experts and develop a plan for protecting children from gun violence in their schools, homes, and communities, email lawcenter@giffords.org.

Learn more about the devastating impact gun violence has on our nation's youth, as well as the policies proven to protect children, in our report ***Protecting the Next Generation***.



From top: Activists march on the Capitol in Washington DC; Marjory Stoneman Douglas students mourn the loss of their classmates; Chicago activist Raheem Tyler holds the photo of Terrell Bosley, who was shot and killed getting ready for band rehearsal at church.



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13. Calculations based on data from 2013-2017. The number of children killed in gun homicides at schools was obtained from *The Washington Post* and verified against data compiled by the Center for Homeland Security and Defense. *The Washington Post*’s School Shooting Tracker is available at https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2018/local/school-shootings-database/?utm_term=.31abe27c1082, and the Center for Homeland Security and Defense’s School Shooting Tracker is available at www.chds.us/ssdb. The number of children killed in gun suicides and unintentional gun discharges was obtained from the CDC WISQARS, <https://www.cdc.gov/injury/wisqars/fatal.html>. To estimate the number of children killed in their communities and in the context of domestic violence, we extrapolated NVDRS data on the circumstances involved in child homicides to national data from the CDC’s WISQARS. NVDRS data was obtained from the following research article in published in *Pediatrics*; Katherine Fowler, et al., “Childhood Firearm Injuries in the United States,” *Pediatrics* 140, no. 1 (2017).

GIFFORDS LAW CENTER

TO PREVENT GUN VIOLENCE

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For 25 years, the legal experts at Giffords Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence have been fighting for a safer America by researching, drafting, and defending the laws, policies, and programs proven to save lives from gun violence. Founded in the wake of a 1993 mass shooting in San Francisco, in 2016 the Law Center joined with former Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords to form a courageous new force for gun safety that stretches coast to coast.