

Testimony for:

The Special Legislative Study Commission to Evaluate and Provide Recommendations on Mandated Safety Protocols for Rhode Island Schools.

*There is no such thing as a trauma-informed active-shooter drill.*

The agony detonated by school shootings cannot be exaggerated. Shootings at school during the instructional day are a form of torture that radiates through the families, school staff and deeply into the community at large. Whole towns take years to recover from the trauma. American parents are terrified for their children.

But is the rampant, debilitating fear well-founded? Criminology professor [James Alan Fox](#) would say that we are making ourselves crazy with fear over what is actually a rare event. Fox is a research professor who maintains a [Mass Killing Database](#) at Northeastern University. While the number of children dying by guns has increased, the increase is due to suicides, homicides and accidents. Since 1999-2000, 384 school shootings took place, and of those, 88 were fatal.

This is not to dismiss the avoidable misery of America's tolerance of gun violence on public health. But Fox estimates that the odds of a child dying at school is [1 in 8 million](#), or about the same as getting hit by lightning or dying in an earthquake. As he says, one is always too many. But the oceanic fear brought on by these odds is out of proportion.

Conversely, the odds of shooter drills causing trauma and potentially long-term mental health issues are roughly 100%. They're terrifying. And no amount of warning that the drill is not real will relieve anyone's mind of the potential for the real thing.

Given the overwhelming evidence of the already poor and deteriorating mental health of America's children, we should stop inflicting trauma on school communities by all means. Gun detectors are traumatic and send the message that we have already lost a war. Student resource officers have never been known to be helpful in a shooting and are often themselves [a source of some students' trauma](#).

By all means limit access to the building. Be very careful of those side doors that get propped open for the miscreants who want to go to McDonalds in the middle of the day or for whatever reason.

But as to active shooter drill:

1. First and foremost, kids should not be involved in drills at all, ever. The school's administration should have a clear plan for the speedy egress of the school community, or, in the worst-case scenario, a plan for where the adults can protect the kids. The adults are responsible for keeping the kids as safe as possible. If the adults feel the need to rehearse a drill with each other, fine. But don't steal a moment of kids' instructional time to traumatize them.

2. To get the adults' safety plan to work maximally well, keep cell phones out of schools. Ken Trump, president of [National School Safety and Security Offices](#), warns that students focused on their phones in an emergency can't "pay 100% attention to the directions of the adults and follow steps that could save their life." Furthermore, "If we're relying on the kids to make the 911 calls, we have a bigger problem that goes beyond cell phone issues." Cell phones have endless ways of breaching safety.
3. Perhaps most importantly, pull the school together as a mutually supportive community. Take time to do this. The advisory protocol was designed to do this in secondary schools. Elementary classes can use circle time to answer open-ended questions that help them get to know one another personally. Communities are safe when intentional closeness creates relationships and compassion. Often shooters let it be known what they are thinking. According to [2023 SurveyWorks data](#), only 59% of elementary students "trust that their school community will hear their side of the story and take it seriously." That's not good enough. Only 29% of secondary students feel this trust, on average, which is terrible. Work on that.
4. Lastly, of course, deal with guns. To protect kids and schools, treat guns as a public health disaster.

This might sound like a tangent, but during Covid, most developed countries did not mask kids 12 or under, and some not at all. They knew the risks but chose the kids' mental health over the risks to the adults. Those countries did not have worse health outcomes, and their kids are not suffering a national mental health crisis as ours are. We adults chose us over them.

Therefore, please resolve to consider carefully and prioritize kids' mental health. If policies and practices are truly traumatizing – as opposed to kids getting upset by taking tests – do not use them. Ever.

Respectfully submitted,

Julia Steiny  
38 Forest St. Providence, RI 02906  
401-286-2609