



# The American Epidemic: A New Focus On Student Safety

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Students adopt a new focus on safety in the  
midst of patterned violence in schools.





Originally created to teach literature, history, mathematics, and other numerous subjects, schools historically provided students with the basic foundations of knowledge needed to prepare for post-education living. In recent decades, the harsh realities associated with life after school have crept into the classroom. Now, not only is the importance of literature, history and mathematics discussed, but topics that might be deemed more mature, such as gun violence, suicide and bullying, have approached the forefront of educational, social and legislative conversations. The increase in dialogue surrounding school safety is logical considering patterns of school shootings have increasingly spread since the 1990s. Since the Columbine Massacre, a school shooting resulting in the murder of 12 students and one teacher, there has been heightened fear and precautions of what some call “the uniquely American epidemic.”

## The Effects of Violence

For decades, as violence and crime increase, pressure has been placed against policymakers at both the federal and state levels to create safer schools. Nearly 30 years ago, Congress passed the Gun-Free Schools Act, which required that schools, receiving federal education funds, create zero-tolerance policies concerning school safety.

Before this, decisions were made on the local and district level. According to NCSL.org, from 2018 to 2020, 20 school-safety-related bills and resolutions were identified, although no resolutions were adopted, and only two resolutions were enacted. As a consequence of the lack of legislation, many student groups and organizations created protests that have taken over the nation, such as the National Student Walkout which also took place at Liberty High School in 2018.

Internal Security Officer, Beck Wagner, said in the same way patterns of protest and advocacy spread in the US, patterns of school shootings can spread just as easily. The “copycat effect” or, in relation to school shootings, the “Columbine Effect,” refers to the replication of threatening and/or violent actions inspired by previous shootings.

“I think Liberty High School is affected by things going on in the nation, like if a school shooting or something happened somewhere else—say down in Texas—we’re [security] made aware of it,” Wagner said. “When we hear these things, we are much more aware that something else could happen locally because it’s very possible that there might be copycat shootings that could occur.”

## Social Media

Notably harmless social media trends like the ice bucket challenge, which was used to raise awareness for ALS, social media has become a platform for widespread association, growth, community and trends. Although more recently, there has been a rise in violent and sometimes destructive student actions, promoted by trends on platforms such as TikTok. Last year, the “devious lick” trend encouraged students to destroy, steal and/or vandalize school property and then post it on social media. Internal Security Officer Kim True recognizes the plague of school shootings occurring but notes that the media might be partly to blame.

“I’m responsible for securing the school, making sure the doors are secure, walking the halls and checking on kids that may look a little distressed—just overall safety, but also in a way, just watching everything,” True said. “With that responsibility, I’m always around students. I see that some things outside of school can have impacts inside the school. I’ve seen social media and how students want their five minutes of fame,

which no one knows what's to become of that desire. They think 'If I make this video, or do this action, then I'm going to be cool,' when in reality it can be dangerous or result in you getting suspended or expelled from school."

## Technology

Despite technology's potential role in threatening the safety of schools, it has been used by many institutions as a means of crisis intervention and prevention. At LHS, the popular website Sprigeo, which is an online reporting system used to report bullying and other school safety issues, has been implemented to combat some of the harmful effects that the media can bring upon student safety. According to Sprigeo.com, the bullying and threat prevention service is used by more than 4,000 schools nationwide, although its effectiveness is disputed.

Freshman Haley Martinaz argues that Sprigeo no longer has the same effect that it once had—ultimately pushing her to feel less safe at school.

"Honestly, I think Sprigeo could help prevent certain safety concerns, but everyone takes Sprigeo as a joke," Martinez said. "'Oh, I'm gonna report you on Sprigeo!' is a common phrase to hear in the halls because it isn't taken seriously. Even beyond that, Sprigeo is just a website; it takes a few hours to days to work. We shouldn't be told to report our issues, which could be urgent, to a website that might not even work."

## Prevention

Security officer Becky Wagner says her job is fluid and is all about adaptation and is open to the concerns of students.

"We have meetings with our superiors and the administration staff, they ask us for our ideas and input into situations, whether it's dealing with students' safety or the security of the building. So, I think that they do listen to us and help to improve the safety of the school," Wagner said. "Regardless, as students, you guys see stuff that we don't, so if something is happening, it won't hurt to bring it to the attention of somebody within the school district, whether that be a parent, staff or teacher. We might not be aware of certain situations but if there is something you think is severe, don't wait to grab an adult and tell them."

Security officer Kim True gives similar advice but says that students' actions in relationships, friendships and everyday interactions in school can potentially make life-saving differences.

"I just think if you see somebody that looks down or depressed, or has problems, just be more open in going up and talking to them," True said. "Just talk to each other and say, 'Hey, you know, is everything okay? How are you doing today?' Interaction with people sometimes goes a long way. A lot of people get made fun of—it just happens, but the choice to stop it is up to you."

Safety in schools continues to be a significant conversation despite the efforts and legislation that have been established over time—effective or not. Student safety, or lack thereof, has caused disruption in both educational and political settings, sparking the question: will our schools ever be safe again?

On Nov. 30, 2021, a mass shooting occurred at Oxford High School in Oxford Township, Michigan. Four students were killed and seven people were injured. Three prayer services were held on the night of Nov. 30, a memorial was created outside the school with stuffed animals and flowers and a candlelight vigil was held at Michigan State University on Dec. 7 to honor the victims of the shooting. "Interaction with people sometimes goes a long way," True said. "A lot of people get made fun of—it just happens, but the choice to stop it is up to you."

INFORMATION COURTESY OF EVERYTOWN RESEARCH

in 2021, there were at least

187

incidents of gunfire on school grounds in the US, resulting in

42 deaths and

113 injuries

77%

of school shooting incidents, at least one person knew about the attacker's plan.

100%

of school attackers exhibited warning signs.

73-80%

of school shooters obtained the gun(s) from their home or the homes of relatives or friends.