

# Chapter 6: School Shootings

**"We're going to need a lot of support here to help those who've been affected by this tragedy ... get through it."<sup>1</sup>**

– Mayor Christine Hunschofsky, Parkland FL

## Chapter Summary

The best practices described elsewhere in this Playbook apply to a mass shooting that takes place in a school. However, school shootings merit special attention because, although exceedingly rare, they present unique challenges for mayors. Schools are usually governed and regulated by entities not under the control of a mayor, making it difficult to collaborate on safety planning. Also, school shootings often occur in smaller cities that lack the staff and resources large cities have to devote to the response and recovery. Most importantly, school shootings target children. The community may experience heightened anguish and outrage due to the age of the victims.

**Preparedness** is essential. Cultivate a strong professional relationship with your police chief or local sheriff, even if they do not report to you. Schedule a tabletop exercise with city leaders (including your city manager and city commissioners), and law enforcement, county, and school officials. Use the exercise to determine roles, communication channels, a school security protocol, and the location of a Family Reunification Center in the event of a school mass shooting. Familiarize yourself with the issues surrounding active shooter drills and school safety.

Your role during the **response** to a school shooting may include facilitating the flow of information between school leadership, parents, and law enforcement, as well as protecting families from the press. If a public mass shooting happens elsewhere in the community, you can alert school partners to activate lockdown procedures to keep students safe.

In the **recovery** phase, consult with school leaders to determine how your office and city agencies can best support the school community. It may also help to consult with child trauma experts, and mayors and groups of family members who have been affected by a school shooting in the past.



## Preparedness

### Cultivate Relationships with Law Enforcement

Maintain a working relationship with law enforcement leaders, even if they do not report to you. Request a briefing on school safety protocols currently in place. Your role is to understand these protocols and (if applicable) to provide budgeting priority and oversight to ensure police have the resources they need.

#### Mayors in Action: Challenges Working with Law Enforcement



In Parkland, FL, the city lacked its own police force. It contracted with the Broward County Sheriff's Office (BSO) for law enforcement services and the Coral Springs Parkland Fire Department (CSPFD) for fire/EMS. As a result, the emergency response to the Marjory Stoneham Douglas High School shooting was led by two agencies with different response protocols and tactics, which proved difficult.<sup>2</sup>

Because no communication protocol had been established between city public information officers (PIOs) and law enforcement PIOs in advance, the Mayor, the City Commission, and staffers had difficulty obtaining real-time information about the law enforcement response.<sup>3</sup> In fact, according to press reports, officials at City Hall did not even attempt to engage law enforcement because they did not want to contribute to the chaos of the response, leaving them to learn of updates from television coverage.<sup>4</sup>

### Cultivate Relationships with School Officials

Even though you may not have authority over local schools, you should establish relationships with leaders of the schools in your city. This may include school board members, the county school superintendent, parent associations, college presidents, and organizations that provide school-based services. Use these relationships to work together to plan and promote school safety best practices in schools across the city.

### Schedule a Tabletop Exercise Focused on a School Shooting

Consider organizing a tabletop exercise with law enforcement, county, and school officials to plan the city's response to a school shooting. This effort can help ensure each school has a violence prevention plan in place, and that schools, law enforcement officials, and city and county agencies understand their role in the unlikely event that a school shooting takes place. For more information, see Appendix A on Training, as well as Chapter 1 on Communications and Chapter 3 on Victims and Families.



## Key Resource: FEMA Campus Resilience Toolkit

**FEMA Campus Resilience Toolkit:** This resource can be used to facilitate a tabletop exercise to plan a response to a school shooter.  
[https://educateiowa.gov/sites/files/ed/documents/Iowa\\_Elementary\\_School\\_Active\\_Shooter\\_TTX\\_SitMan2.docx](https://educateiowa.gov/sites/files/ed/documents/Iowa_Elementary_School_Active_Shooter_TTX_SitMan2.docx)



## Ensure School District Has Developed a Violence Prevention Plan

The U.S. Secret Service recommends that school districts develop a comprehensive violence prevention plan.<sup>5</sup> The plan should identify threats, create a central reporting mechanism, and develop risk management options. Although you are not responsible for developing such a plan, you may want to ensure such a plan is developed and that you are familiar with it. The following section provides information and resources that may be useful to you and your staff, and can be shared with school district officials, if needed. We advise familiarizing yourself with these issues before meeting with school officials to discuss school safety.

## School Safety Information and Resources

### U.S. Department of Justice Community-Oriented Policing Services Office Report

In 2020, a working group of the Community-Oriented Policing Services (COPS) office at the U.S. Department of Justice produced a report that outlines ten essential actions schools and law enforcement agencies can take to prevent and respond to school shootings. The topic areas of these actions are:

- Comprehensive Needs Assessment
- School Climate
- Campus, Building, and Classroom Security
- Anonymous Reporting Systems
- Coordination with First Responders
- Behavior Threat Assessment and Management
- School-Based Law Enforcement
- Mental Health Resources
- Drills
- Social Media Monitoring



## Key Resources: COPS School Safety Planning Recommendations



**Department of Justice, Ten Essential Actions to Improve School Safety:** a COPS Office School Safety Working Group Report to the Attorney General. The two-page Executive Summary can be accessed here (accessed February 24, 2021).  
<https://cops.usdoj.gov/RIC/Publications/cops-w0891-pub.pdf>

### Role of Law Enforcement in School Safety Planning

Law enforcement agencies often work with schools to develop their plan. For example, in Pittsburgh, the police provide training to Community Resource Officers (CROs)<sup>i</sup> (based in schools) on threat assessment and active shooter situations. In coordination with the FBI, the Pittsburgh police perform walk-throughs with school officials to assess security, make recommendations for technology and emergency preparedness, and establish lines of communication for use in the event of a shooting.

### Role of City in School Safety Planning

Florida law requires cities to maintain school security plans and the layout of every school, which can help law enforcement locate and isolate the shooter during the response. Consider implementing this practice even if your state does not require you to do so.

Also, even if you do not have authority over the schools in your city, you can advocate for student safety and ensure student and parent concerns are part of the process of planning active shooter drills and school violence prevention plans. You can also advocate for resources needed by the school district, such as funding for mental health resources for students (see *Image 1*).

### Best Practice Tip



**Keep school maps and security plans on file at city hall.**

--**Orlando Mayor Buddy Dyer:** "Florida has state legislation relating to school resource officers [and threat assessment]. We have plans, documents of all of the school locations that you can just pull up on your computer in the event you're having to respond to a school shooting."

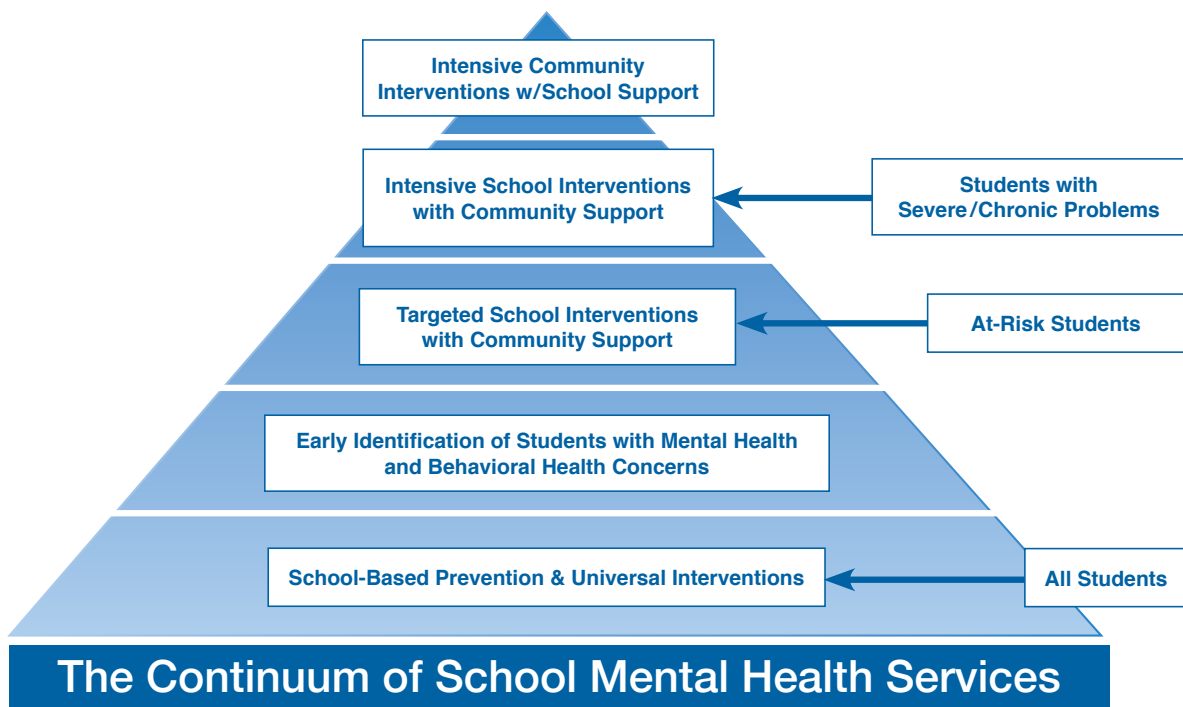
<sup>i</sup> Note, there is some disagreement among researchers on the security value of CROs. See James Alan Fox and Aviva M. Rich-Shea, Don't defund all police, but keep police out of schools. Kids will do better without them., USA TODAY (2020), <https://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2020/06/12/defund-school-police-obstacles-to-student-success-column/5336791002/> (last visited May 27, 2021).



## Student Mental Health Services

Most school shooters left behind evidence that they were victims of bullying or otherwise in crisis; for example, the majority were suicidal. Appropriate services might have helped some of them. Therefore, in addition to countering external threats, schools should address the mental health needs of their students.

As the diagram below highlights, the community has a role to play in developing appropriate mental health services for schools. For example, in Washington D.C., the Department of Behavioral Health and the Department of Health collaborated on a behavioral health plan for school-based services in the district's schools. The plan coordinated clinical care from both agency clinicians and other local resources.<sup>6</sup>



**Figure 3:** Role of Community in School Mental Health Services<sup>7</sup>

Consider asking for a report that assesses the school district's mental health system. Meet with school leaders and mental health experts to solicit their recommendations on ways the city can support their efforts to provide needed mental health services. For example, you may be able to advocate with elected officials, connect the district to needed resources and expertise, or help the district obtain funding. You can also advocate that schools contract with managing entities that are able to provide behavioral health services, rather than provide services in-house, which is not a core competency of schools and school districts.

## Key Resource: Mental Health System Assessment Tool



The **SHAPE (School Health Assessment and Performance Evaluation) website** provides tools to help schools and districts assess and improve school mental health systems. <http://www.theshapesystem.com/>

### Active Shooter Drills

Most states require schools to engage in safety training, which includes some form of active shooter drill.<sup>8</sup> However, the specifics of such drills are often left to school districts to determine. The COPS report provides resources to help schools develop age-appropriate drills,<sup>9</sup> as does the American Academy of Pediatrics.<sup>10</sup> It is worth noting that child mental health experts have warned that realistic or surprise active shooter drills can traumatize children.<sup>11</sup> The nation's two largest teachers' unions, the American Federation of Teachers and the National Education Association, have called for an end to realistic drills.<sup>12</sup>

### A Word About the School Security Industry

According to press reports, the school security industry is now a \$3 billion market, offering a range of products that may or may not increase the security of students in your school district.<sup>13</sup> Some experts argue most of these “security” systems are not worth the investment and may have negative effects on the school population.<sup>14</sup> Research has shown that investing in properly trained social workers and mental health professionals does more to create a healthy and safe school environment.<sup>15</sup>

## Response

### Communications

In the case of a school shooting, your primary role is “communicator-in-chief.” You will likely serve as a trusted source of accurate information for parents and the school community, and as a comfort to them. See Chapter 1 on Communications.

### Law Enforcement

You will need to engage with law enforcement officials, even if they do not report to you. Contact the lead law enforcement agency to form the communications strategy for press briefings and agree on a protocol to receive regular law enforcement briefings. In the case of a mass shooting elsewhere in the community, you (or law enforcement officials) may need to contact school officials to urge them to lockdown their schools to protect students. For example, as the shooting at the Inland Regional Center in San Bernardino, CA unfolded, the nearby California State campus and public schools across the city were locked down for hours.<sup>16</sup> See Chapter 1 on Communications and Chapter 4 on Law Enforcement for additional guidance.



## Encourage School Officials to Access Available Resources

School crisis teams can easily be overwhelmed during the response to a school shooting, both because of limited resources and because school officials may have personal relationships with the victims and their families. Therefore, as mayor you can help by encouraging school officials to accept outside assistance, including from local mental health providers and national organizations such as the American Red Cross.

## Seek Advice from Those Who Came Before

Your city—especially if it is a small one—may lack the mental health, staffing, and financial resources needed to support your community in the aftermath of a school shooting. There may be community divisions or other challenges you must address that are unique to school shootings. Seek advice from mayors who have responded to a school shooting and from family members who lost children in a school shooting.<sup>17</sup>

## Recovery

### Mental Health and Recovery Needs

In all public mass shootings, the recovery phase is focused on helping victims, families, and the affected community heal from trauma. In the aftermath of a school shooting, however, unique issues can arise.

You may be dealing with traumatized children or teenagers whose futures may be drastically altered. The emotional toll of a shooting on children can be extreme. Close consultation with child trauma experts is strongly recommended.

The community may experience heightened anguish and outrage due to the age of the victims. Parents may be unwilling to send students back to the school where the shooting took place. Students may even become suicidal. Conspiracy theorists may emerge and torment family members. Your community may become divided on their views of how politicians should respond to school shootings.

You may know many of the affected families personally, so your compassionate leadership will be needed to help guide your community through the difficult grieving process. Working closely with the parents and school community, look for trauma-informed ways to honor the victims and comfort the survivors.

Hosting vigils and memorials and providing opportunities for grieving community members to volunteer and serve others are good starting points. The following information is drawn from press accounts of the first annual remembrance event in Parkland, by all accounts a moving and healing event that included a variety of avenues for people to grieve. See also Chapter 9 on Commemorations.



## Mayors in Action: School Shooting Remembrance Events

Parkland community members and city staff organized events centered on unity and volunteerism for the first annual remembrance of the Parkland Shooting. The “Day of Service and Love” offered “something for everyone,” recognizing that people process grief in different ways.

Notably, events were intentionally free of political messaging at the behest of the Mayor, who wrote a letter inviting elected officials to attend, but not to speak, at the city’s remembrance ceremony on February 14, 2019.<sup>18</sup>



Throughout the day there were activities for students and community members, including painting stones for an outdoor memorial, playing with therapy dogs, and packing meals for children experiencing food insecurity.<sup>19</sup> The Broward County School Board hosted community service projects at a local park. The Coral Springs Museum of Art sponsored, outdoor music, art projects, and a petting zoo.<sup>20</sup> The school opened for a half day. Some students attended school events, participated in a moment of silence, or performed a community service project. Others chose to stay home.<sup>21</sup> There was a breakfast for first responders.

The city partnered with Coral Springs in a Bloomberg Philanthropies-funded art project called the Temple of Time. This project, which was popular in the community, was designed and constructed by the artist in collaboration with community members. It was completed on February 14 in time for the first remembrance ceremonies and ceremonially burned in May of 2019. Communal prayer vigils and candlelight ceremonies were held throughout the day.<sup>22</sup>

## Funding for School Recovery

Eligibility for most funding opportunities, such as Project School Emergency Response to Violence (SERV) is limited to local educational institutions.<sup>23</sup> If needed, work with schools to determine whether the city can help them identify resources to meet specific needs. See also Appendix C, which provides links to other funding sources.





## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> NATIONAL PUBLIC RADIO, *Parkland Mayor Speaks About Shooting at Florida High School* (2018), available at <https://www.nhpr.org/post/parkland-mayor-speaks-about-shooting-florida-high-school#stream/0>.

<sup>2</sup> NATIONAL POLICE FOUNDATION, *Recovering and Moving Forward: Lessons Learned and Recommendations Following the Shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School* (2019).

<sup>3</sup> *Id.*

<sup>4</sup> *Id.*

<sup>5</sup> NATIONAL THREAT ASSESSMENT CENTER, *Enhancing School Safety Using a Threat Assessment Model: An Operational Guide for Preventing Targeted School Violence* (2018).

<sup>6</sup> OFFICE OF THE DEPUTY MAYOR FOR HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES, *School Mental Health Program and School Health Services Program* (2017), available at <https://dmhhs.dc.gov/publication/school-mental-health-program-and-school-health-services-program> (last visited April 14, 2020).

<sup>7</sup> SUBSTANCE ABUSE AND MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES ADMINISTRATION, *Ready, Set, Go, Review: Screening for Behavioral Health Risk in Schools*, available at [https://www.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/ready\\_set\\_go\\_review\\_mh\\_screening\\_in\\_schools\\_508.pdf](https://www.samhsa.gov/sites/default/files/ready_set_go_review_mh_screening_in_schools_508.pdf) (last visited April 14, 2020).

<sup>8</sup> EVERYTOWN FOR GUN SAFETY, *The Impact of School Safety Drills for Active Shootings* (2020), available at <https://everytownresearch.org/report/the-impact-of-school-safety-drills-for-active-shootings/>.

<sup>9</sup> COPS OFFICE SCHOOL SAFETY WORKING GROUP REPORT TO THE ATTORNEY GENERAL, *Ten Essential Actions to Improve School Safety* (2020).

<sup>10</sup> David J. Schonfeld, Marlene Melzer-Lange, Andrew N. Hashikawa, Peter A. Gorski, *Participation of Children and Adolescents in Live Crisis Drills and Exercises*. PEDIATRICS 146 (3) (September 2020), available at <https://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/146/3/e2020015503/> (last visited April 21, 2021).

<sup>11</sup> Sarah C. Peck, *Profiting from protecting kids is wrong. Halt active shooter drills in schools*, <https://www.sun-sentinel.com/opinion/commentary/fl-op-com-peck-halt-active-shooter-drills-schools-20191120-fbtyjyfutvf4zlyue5ghebi7gm-story.html> (last visited May 4, 2021).

<sup>12</sup> ASSOCIATED PRESS and Elizabeth Chuck, *Two Largest Teachers Unions Call For Schools to Revise or End Active Shooter Drills*, NBC NEWS (February, 2020), available at <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/two-largest-teachers-unions-call-schools-revise-or-end-active-n1136271> (last visited April 14, 2021).

<sup>13</sup> Gary Younge, THE NEW YORK TIMES, *The (Way Too Many) Kids Whose Lives Have Been Upended by Gun Violence*, THE NEW YORK TIMES (March 2021), <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/25/books/review/children-under-fire-john-woodrow-cox.html>.

<sup>14</sup> James Alan Fox and Aviva M. Rich-Shea, *Don't Defund All Police, But Keep Police Out of Schools. Kids Will Do Better Without Them*, USA TODAY (June 2020), <https://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2020/06/12/defund-school-police-obstacles-to-student-success-column/5336791002/>.

<sup>15</sup> Final Report of the Federal Commission on School Safety - U.S. Dept. of Education (pages 120 & 126), <https://www2.ed.gov/documents/school-safety/school-safety-report.pdf>



<sup>16</sup> Neil Nisperos, *San Bernardino City Unified Schools Back in Session Following Mass Shooting*, THE SAN BERNARDINO SUN (December, 2015), available at <https://www.sbsun.com/2015/12/02/san-bernardino-city-unified-schools-back-in-session-following-mass-shooting/>.

<sup>17</sup> Belinda Luscombe and Haley Sweetland Edwards, *'The World Moves On And You Don't.'* *Parents Who Lost Children in School Shootings Find Comfort in a Group No One Wants to Join*, TIME (November 2018), available at <https://time.com/longform/school-shooting-parents/>.

<sup>18</sup> *Id.*

<sup>19</sup> Amy Held, *'We Live With It Every Day': Parkland Community Marks 1 Year Since Massacre*, NATIONAL PUBLIC RADIO, Feb. 2019, available at [www.npr.org/2019/02/14/694688365/we-live-with-it-every-day-parkland-community-marks-one-year-since-massacre](http://www.npr.org/2019/02/14/694688365/we-live-with-it-every-day-parkland-community-marks-one-year-since-massacre).

<sup>20</sup> *Id.*

<sup>21</sup> *Id.*

<sup>22</sup> *Id.*

<sup>23</sup> U.S. DEP'T OF EDUCATION, <https://www2.ed.gov/programs/dvppserv/eligibility.html> (last visited April 14, 2021).



# SCHOOL SHOOTINGS CHECKLIST

## Preparedness

- Schedule a tabletop exercise to determine roles, communication channels, school security protocol, and the location of a Family Reunification Center in the event of a school mass shooting.
- Establish relationships with school officials and law enforcement leaders.
- Propose and participate in a planning team for school safety.
- Suggest a periodic assessment of school district mental health systems.
- Advocate for appropriate school-based trainings, exercises, and drills.

## Response

- Establish communications channels with school officials and law enforcement.
- Consider whether a declaration of emergency is needed to activate further resources. If a state declaration is also needed, call the governor to request.

## Recovery

- Research funding opportunities to help defray the costs of school recovery and student services, improved security, etc.
- Work with school officials to determine the role of the city in supporting the school's recovery and supporting student mental health and resilience.
- Consult with mental health experts, as well as mayors and family members who have been affected by a school shooting.

