JULY 2017

NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF JUSTICE
REPORT

States' Roles in Keeping Schools Safe: Opportunities and Challenges for State School Safety Centers and Other Actors

MARY POULIN CARLTON, PHELAN WYRICK, NADINE FREDERIQUE, AND BASIA LOPEZ

COMPREHENSIVE SCHOOL SAFETY INITIATIVE

NIJ | **National Institute of Justice**
STRENGTHEN SCIENCE. ADVANCE JUSTICE.

NIJ's Comprehensive School Safety Initiative

The Comprehensive School Safety Initiative (CSSI) is a research-focused initiative that brings together the nation's best minds to increase the safety of schools nationwide. The initiative was a response to disturbing, high-profile incidents of school violence. Schools are mostly safe places — but when violence does occur, it can have far-reaching ramifications. CSSI is an investment in developing knowledge about the root causes of school violence, developing strategies for increasing school safety, and rigorously evaluating innovative school safety strategies through pilot programs.

CSSI projects aim to:

1) Identify and understand the potential root causes and consequences of school violence and its impact on school safety.

2) Increase the safety of schools nationwide by developing a solid foundation of knowledge and best practices that can be sustainably implemented through individualized school safety programs, policies, and activities.

3) Help identify matters internal and external to the school that may result in harm to students, teachers, staff, and schools.

4) Implement programs, policies, and practices that improve school safety and climate, focus on the school environment, or enhance educational and other outcomes for students and schools.

5) Identify effective strategies to respond to and resolve safety issues faced by schools and students.

6) In collaboration with key partners from education, law enforcement, behavioral/mental health, and social work, develop and test a comprehensive framework for school safety.

The initiative is focused on K-12 public schools, including public charter schools. CSSI projects require close collaborations between educators, researchers, and other stakeholders in the school community to ask the right questions, prioritize challenges, identify solutions, collect data, and make sense of the findings.

Through projects funded under the CSSI, NIJ works to produce knowledge that can be applied to school safety across the nation and for years to come. Please see the NIJ website for more detailed information on the initiative.

U.S. Department of Justice
Office of Justice Programs
810 Seventh St. N.W.
Washington, DC 20531

Howard Spivak
Acting Director, National Institute of Justice

This and other publications and products of the National Institute of Justice can be found at:

National Institute of Justice
Strengthen Science • Advance Justice
http://www.NIJ.gov

Office of Justice Programs
Building Solutions • Supporting Communities • Advancing Justice
http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov

The National Institute of Justice is the research, development, and evaluation agency of the U.S. Department of Justice. NIJ's mission is to advance scientific research, development, and evaluation to enhance the administration of justice and public safety.

The National Institute of Justice is a component of the Office of Justice Programs, which also includes the Bureau of Justice Assistance; the Bureau of Justice Statistics; the Office for Victims of Crime; the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention; and the Office of Sex Offender Sentencing, Monitoring, Apprehending, Registering, and Tracking.

Opinions or conclusions expressed in this paper are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.

States' Roles in Keeping Schools Safe: Opportunities and Challenges for State School Safety Centers and Other Actors

Introduction

Overview

In almost every state, a state agency or organization is charged with playing a little known but important role in keeping schools safe. In some states, there are organizations whose entire responsibility is related to school safety. These are typically referred to as state school safety centers (SSSC). In other states, staff within state agencies (including departments of education, public safety, state police, and others) are responsible for state school safety efforts. Their work reflects the highest safety priorities faced by schools across the nation and parallels some of the weightiest issues facing the criminal justice system today, including the relationship between law enforcement and the community, concerns about firearms violence, procedural justice, and appropriate responses to misbehavior that may be related to trauma or behavioral health. These organizations have the potential to transform how we approach our responsibilities to keep schools and students safe.

In February 2016, the National Institute of Justice (NIJ) assembled representatives from 20 states for a meeting on state school safety issues in Santa Fe, New Mexico. The purpose of the meeting was to better understand the role of state school safety representatives and learn about their priorities and the challenges they face in doing this work. NIJ is using this information to help shape the activities of the Comprehensive School Safety Initiative (CSSI) — a research-focused initiative with the goal of producing practical knowledge on a wide range of school safety topics in K-12 public and charter schools.

Readers of this report should use it to gain insight into the work and perspectives of meeting attendees. NIJ identified participant perspectives using guided panel discussions, open question-and-answer sessions, topic-based breakout groups, and general discussions on school safety priorities and concerns. In addition, the meeting included presentations on CSSI, federal school safety-related data collections, and technical assistance available

through the U.S. Department of Education (ED). The agenda, included in the appendix, provides additional details about the meeting.

States' Roles in School Safety: Diverse and Broad

States play a key role in school safety. States carry out a variety of activities to support school safety, including providing training, resources, and guidance to schools and school districts on topics that range from bullying to emergency operations planning. For the sake of simplicity in this document, we use state education agency (SEA) to refer to the state government agency responsible for providing information, resources, and technical assistance on educational issues to schools and residents; local education agency (LEA) to refer to the local government agency charged with education issues at a school district level; and state school safety center to refer to any agency or organization responsible for doing school safety work on the state level.

In advance of the meeting, NIJ conducted a review of online sources and identified 56 SSSCs in 48 states and the District of Columbia, including seven states with multiple agencies responsible for school safety efforts. Thirty-six centers were housed in SEAs; 12 in public safety, homeland security, and emergency management offices; five in universities; and three in other state agencies/organizations. The states represented at the meeting reflected this variation. In most cases, state-level responsibility for school safety rested in a single agency, with a minority representing states where multiple agencies or entities were responsible for school safety. Where multiple agencies were involved in a single state, responsibilities were often divided by the topic addressed. For example, one agency may be charged with emergency management, and another with bullying, school climate, or other issues.

SSSCs vary widely in terms of their responsibilities and resources and are shaped by a range of factors, including the history of each state's school safety efforts. The characteristics and priorities of SSSCs are influenced, first and foremost, by the legislative and executive government agencies that establish SSSC missions and direct public resources toward school safety. They have been further influenced by factors including the type of organization where the center is housed; high-profile incidents of violence, including school shootings; and the availability of grant resources from federal agencies such as the U.S. Department of Education (Heath et al., 2007). Some states have one or two staff involved in school safety, while others have dozens. Further, some centers have been in place for many years, while others are relatively new. Together, these factors contribute to the variation in what SSSCs do and how they do it.

State School Safety Centers: Key Players in Improving School Safety

Because of their close work with SEAs, LEAs, and schools, SSSCs offer a unique perspective and expertise on what it takes to facilitate changes to improve school safety. SSSCs play a key role in working with federal and state government as well as LEAs and schools in shaping, informing, and implementing legislation, policies, practices, and programming to improve school safety. This often takes the form of training and technical assistance to LEAs and providing formal input that may shape the language of state policies and legislation regarding school safety.

Few publications describe the role of states and their school safety work. One exception is a 2016 publication of the National Governors Association (NGA). In 2015, NGA surveyed states for the first time to learn about their efforts on school safety and security. One question in the survey

asked about organizations within the state that have school safety responsibilities (Powell, 2016). Similar to our findings, NGA found that school safety responsibility typically rests with the SEA.

This report helps fill a gap in the literature regarding the role of SSSCs in seeking to improve school safety. It summarizes the activities, priorities, challenges, and concerns discussed by a group of state-level school safety professionals. It is a snapshot of their input at one point in time in early 2016, but it reflects the significant role that states play in supporting and enhancing school safety across the nation. Discussions, although structured, were not organized to ensure that every participant responded to every question or conversation. This report is not intended to be a representative account of the issues faced by SSSCs in every state, and we do not report on the frequency or proportion of attendees who held a particular view or engaged in a particular activity. We summarize what we learned at the meeting and share recommendations provided by participants to increase knowledge of the work of SSSCs and, more generally, to improve the safety of schools and students.

School Safety Activities

Throughout the course of the meeting, participants had a number of opportunities to report on their school safety activities. Prior to the meeting, NIJ staff examined the centers' websites to obtain a public perspective on their activities. Although this helped to provide preliminary insight into their work, meeting discussions revealed that SSSCs do much more than their websites reveal.

SSSCs Train, Collaborate, and Use Research and Data

SSSCs engage with individual schools, LEAs, state legislators, and others to deliver trainings, work with others to enhance school safety, provide information to facilitate informed decision-making, and use research and data. Some SSSCs participate in research activities to improve school safety.

SSSCs are responsible for developing and delivering training to education and public safety officials on a variety of topics, which are discussed in detail below. These trainings often take place in person but may also be available online, depending on the nature of the training, financial considerations, and the number of individuals to be trained.

SSSC staff must be ready to respond to stakeholder requests for information on hot topics in school safety. They respond to proposed state legislation, address high-profile incidents, and provide information on issues of concern in the local community.

Some SSSCs work closely with their state legislatures to analyze proposed statutes that have implications for school safety. They may provide expert judgment and consultation on the perceived advantages and disadvantages of the legislation and respond to the legislature with written recommendations. This gives them a significant voice in policy development. For example, in 2015 the state of Oklahoma passed a law making it legal for teachers and staff to carry firearms on public school campuses. The bill states that the school district or board of education may designate a school employee to attend a training in order to be armed. SSSC staff are working on policies and procedures to implement that legislation.

SSSC staff respond to high-profile school safety incidents that happen in their own and other jurisdictions. If the incident takes place in their jurisdiction, the need to respond is particularly great. If the incident is highly publicized and not in the SSSC's jurisdiction, they often provide guidance to

schools, legislators, and other stakeholders in their jurisdiction to prevent similar incidents or report what they are already doing to prevent such an incident. One meeting participant discussed a situation in which he worked with community leaders and police to determine when it would be safe to allow schools to reopen following a communitywide crisis involving violence. Once the schools reopened, the SSSC helped determine what services students would need to help them process and recover from the crisis.

SSSC representatives spoke at length about their interagency efforts to ensure school safety. This goes beyond collaborations with local school districts and law enforcement to include collaborations with other units of state and local government, community organizations, parents, and other groups. For example, the North Carolina center works closely with their Governor's Task Force on Safer Schools by putting together a school risk-and-response management system, using U.S. Department of Homeland Security funding.

SSSCs work with each other to improve their school safety efforts and share knowledge. The Maryland Center for School Safety is a relatively young center. It is actively engaged in developing partnerships with other SSSCs that are geographically close. Some SSSCs invite individuals from other states to attend their trainings and conferences.

Although the extent of involvement varies, SSSCs engage in a range of research-related and data collection activities. Some conduct research and evaluation studies and are avid users of research. Others, though they use data and research, noted challenges in doing so. Some SSSCs collect, analyze, and/or integrate data from schools and report those data to federal agencies or to schools. For example, SSSCs use statistical collections, such as the Youth Risk Behavior Survey,[1] to help identify school safety problems. Another example of a state's work with data is from the District of Columbia representative. As the data analysis manager in her office, she plays a central role in analyzing the District's discipline and attendance data. A number of SSSCs are also engaged in efforts to collect school climate data.

Other SSSCs collaborate with local researchers to study the impact of their efforts. In Texas, school safety responsibilities are carried out by a university-based SSSC with a research division. Elsewhere, SSSCs partner with researchers from local universities to undertake discrete tasks. SSSC staff also review research evidence and interpret it for stakeholders. One meeting participant noted that it is in the school district's best interest to focus on initiatives that have solid research foundations. For that reason, when new initiatives are proposed, she requests information on research evidence to support the initiative and asks questions about the initiative's outcomes.

SSSCs use data to communicate school safety-related information and statistics to legislators and community stakeholders. This helps raise awareness about what is actually happening at the schools; for example, SSSCs may report on the percentage of students who report being bullied at school.

SSSCs train, collaborate with others, use research, and respond to stakeholders on a variety of topics, as discussed in detail in the following section.

---

[1] The survey, administered by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, monitors six types of health-risk behaviors that contribute to the leading causes of death and disability among youth and young adults.

SSSCs Address Many Topics

SSSCs address a wide range of topics, including emergency operations, school climate, discipline, and behavioral health. Within these broad topics, SSSCs address many concerns.

Helping schools prepare for an emergency and be able to address threats is an important task for SSSCs. This typically encompasses emergencies that range from preparing for natural disasters to responding to school shootings. SSSC staff help develop emergency operations plans (EOPs), improve physical security at schools, and conduct threat assessments.

EOPs are documents that describe who will do what, when, how, with what resources, and by what authority to prepare and respond to an emergency (U.S. Department of Education, 2013). Developing a high-quality EOP is a significant undertaking. It may include bringing together stakeholders, considering all possible threats and hazards, writing and sharing the plan, training those who will implement the plan, and conducting exercises to test the plan. SSSCs use resources from federal agencies (such as the ED to prepare EOPs). ED resources include trainings from the Readiness and Emergency Management for Schools (REMS) Technical Assistance Center.[2] SSSCs also conduct trainings for teachers and administrators on emergency operations management, active shooter/threat responses, and incident recovery.

SSSCs help enhance the physical security of school buildings in some states. For example, several SSSCs conduct safety assessments of school buildings. One participant indicated that the SSSC works with architects to consider school safety threats in their building designs. Others discussed their work to install security cameras, identification card access systems, door locks, and other building security efforts.

Threat assessment is a legislatively mandated task for a number of SSSCs. Threat assessment typically involves the appraisal of student behaviors to determine whether there is cause for a response by the school to prevent a serious school safety incident. Some SSSCs are tasked with creating the policies and procedures for conducting threat assessments. SSSCs reported that threat assessment work consumes an increasing amount of resources for SSSCs and schools that have experienced an increase in the number of cyberswatting[3] incidents and bomb threats. Some SSSCs are being asked to help schools determine how to respond to these incidents, which often turn out to be hoaxes. While active shooters and bomb threats consume resources in some jurisdictions, others pointed out that they are more likely to deal with natural hazards and threats such as tornadoes or wildlife on campus. In those jurisdictions, the threat assessment exercises look different than those focused on student behaviors.

Many SSSCs work to improve school climate and school discipline by training school resource officers (SROs), supporting efforts to ameliorate concerns about inappropriate school discipline, and incorporating social behavioral interventions in schools.

A number of SSSCs work with LEAs and schools to improve the hiring and training of SROs.[4] They emphasized the need for

---

[2] The REMS Technical Assistance Center was established in 2004 and is administered by the ED Office of Safe and Healthy Students. It provides information, resources, training, and services on school emergency operations planning.

[3] "Cyberswatting" is the act of deceiving an emergency service into dispatching an emergency response on the false report of an ongoing critical incident.

[4] Per the Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, SROs are sworn law enforcement officers responsible for providing school-based security and crime prevention services. SROs' responsibilities are similar to those of regular police officers. For more information, see http://www.cops.usdoj.gov/Default.asp?Item=2687.

further work to improve SRO effectiveness. There was some agreement that the caliber of officers hired as SROs has improved over the years. Rather than attracting officers who may be disengaged from their jobs, SROs are increasingly engaged officers who have a passion for working with youth. A number of participants opined that this shift has increased the professionalization of the SRO position and may help address concerns about inappropriate discipline. However, they still emphasized the need to train SROs and others on discipline issues. When schools are first assigned an SRO, school administrators may not understand what the SRO's job should entail. To address this, some SSSCs provide legal education training to school administrators or meet with administrators to discuss the SROs' activities, their legal responsibilities, and the limits of their tasks at school. Some SSSCs collect data on school-based arrests initiated by SROs to inform stakeholders about school discipline practices. Further, some SSSCs are currently involved in efforts to evaluate SROs and their impact on the school-to-prison pipeline,[5] including one funded through NIJ's Comprehensive School Safety Initiative.

To address concerns about the school-to-prison pipeline and school discipline, a number of SSSCs have helped develop strong memoranda of understanding between school districts and law enforcement agencies that govern each party's role in student discipline. Several SSSCs supported training and conferences to address exclusionary discipline and the school-to-prison pipeline. Such training may address the roles of SROs as well as efforts to educate school administrators on alternatives to school expulsion and responsibilities for educating students who are suspended or expelled from school. One alternative typically discussed was restorative justice.[6] SSSC staff report that, as a result of providing information on restorative justice, a number of school districts have adopted restorative justice practices with the intention of ensuring that consequences are proportional to youths' behavior and that discipline is thoughtful, appropriate, and beneficial.

Many SSSCs discussed the importance of improving school climate. According to the ED, school climate is—

> a broad, multifaceted concept that involves many aspects of the student's educational experience. A positive school climate is the product of a school's attention to fostering safety; promoting a supportive academic, disciplinary, and physical environment; and encouraging and maintaining respectful, trusting, and caring relationships throughout the school community no matter the setting — from pre-K/elementary school to higher education (American Institutes for Research, n.d.).

Efforts to improve school climate encompass activities from school climate assessments to bullying prevention programs. One state representative discussed a state mandate that all schools complete school climate surveys. The SSSC works with schools to implement this mandate. Once the surveys are complete, each school receives a report to encourage the school to take steps to improve its climate. The highlight box offers further information about how this state is trying to improve school climate.

---

[5] The school-to-prison pipeline generally refers to excessive and inappropriate school discipline that either (1) criminalizes minor misbehavior at school or (2) results in suspending or expelling youth from school and ultimately contributes to increased involvement in crime and involvement in the justice system. The ED's Office of Civil Rights has found that exclusionary discipline is used disproportionately for black and Hispanic students.

[6] In the school setting, restorative justice is typically focused on nonpunitive efforts that bring together parties in conflict to discuss and resolve the conflict and provide support to prevent the reoccurrence of conflict. It includes principles of accountability, safety, and competency development. It can take many forms, including peace circles and peer mediation (Fronius et al., 2016).

Georgia School Climate Star Rating

What is the School Climate Star Rating?

The School Climate Star Rating provides school-level data on the following components:

• **School climate.** Student, teacher, and parent perceptions of a school's climate.

• **Student discipline.** Student discipline, using a weighted suspension rate.

• **Safe and substance-free learning environment.** School discipline incidents and student survey responses on the use of illegal substances and the prevalence of violence, bullying, and unsafe incidents within a school.

• **Attendance.** The average daily attendance of teachers, administrators, and staff members and the percentage of students with less than six unexcused absences.

How is the School Climate Star Rating calculated?

The School Climate Star Rating is calculated using data from the Georgia Student Health Survey 2.0, Georgia School Personnel Survey, Georgia Parent Survey, student discipline data, and attendance records for students, teachers, staff, and administrators.

What does the rating mean?

Each school receives a rating of one to five stars, with five stars representing an excellent school climate and one star representing a school climate most in need of improvement. Schools have access to a report that allows them to identify areas in need of improvement and plan interventions to improve achievement for all students.

Georgia is the first state in the nation to include school climate as an early indicator in its academic accountability system, called the College and Career Ready Performance Index (CCRPI). A school's rating is publicly available to interested parties. Those stakeholders can engage with the school to seek improvement in the school climate.

Georgia Department of Education (n.d.). *School Climate* (Atlanta, GA: Georgia Department of Education), https://www.gadoe.org/External-Affairs-and-Policy/Policy/Pages/School-Climate.aspx.

In addition to assessments of school climate, SSSC efforts are aimed at improving the capacity of schools to address the behavioral health of students on a range of issues, including suicide prevention, truancy, bullying, trauma and abuse, social emotional learning,[7] cultural competency, and alternatives to traditional discipline. Addressing these issues, which can impact students at and away from school, may include programming targeted to students, and training for teachers and other personnel.

Emerging and Persistent School Safety Concerns for SSSCs

Meeting participants identified a number of concerns and challenges that they face in the course of their work. Some of these concerns are ongoing, but others are relatively new. A number of concerns relate to working with others, including those who seek to influence the work of the SSSC, those with whom the SSSCs try to engage, and others who do school safety work. In

---

[7] According to the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, social emotional learning is "the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions." For more information, see http://www.casel.org/social-and-emotional-learning/.

addition, some SSSCs found certain topics particularly challenging either because of the nature of the topic or their knowledge of it.

Stakeholders' Perceptions of School Safety

Many stakeholders influence states' work on school safety. This includes state legislators funding the schools and centers; parents of children in schools; school district superintendents; architects who design schools; and the teachers, staff, and principals of schools. Several stakeholder-related factors drive the approaches that SSSCs use. These factors include stakeholders' perspectives on what topics are important, how safe schools are perceived to be, which approaches the stakeholders think are effective, and public pressures.

SSSCs are called on to provide comments or information to lawmakers or executives considering school safety legislation or to develop an approach to implement enacted legislation. SSSCs offered examples about when this worked well, including one situation when legislators and SSSCs engaged in an ongoing dialogue while legislation was being drafted. Although lawmakers and executives have school safety in mind when drafting legislation, SSSCs reported that this can be challenging when new legislation is so broad that it provides insufficient guidance to the SSSCs or schools, is based on a misunderstanding of data, or is a reaction to a recent tragedy, based on good intentions but is likely to do little to improve school safety. Because legislators sometimes play a significant role in how resources on school safety are expended, some SSSCs are particularly cautious in how they react to legislation

or expend resources out of concern that they will do something that will not be well received. This can make it difficult for SSSCs to implement projects intended to improve school safety.

Meeting participants gave many examples of situations that create challenges for SSSCs to effectively engage with stakeholders. Parents may not be aware of all pertinent issues regarding school safety, may only become concerned when a tragedy occurs, or may be overly concerned about school safety. Given limited resources or other issues, schools may not want to focus on developing a school safety plan, or a particular element of a plan, unless it is mandated by the state. Architects may not understand that certain design elements, such as glass walls, may pose a significant safety hazard. Even when stakeholders are convinced that they should be concerned about school safety, they may want to focus on certain topics, such as school shootings, but not others, such as more common forms of student violence or self-harm. SSSCs want to work with stakeholders proactively on a comprehensive range of topics so they will be prepared to prevent and respond to school safety situations.

Working With Schools on School Safety

The division of responsibilities for school safety can present challenges. Participants reported that when multiple agencies in a state are responsible for school safety, being aware of and coordinating work with each other is a challenge. This may be an issue even when responsibilities are split across topics, such as when one agency is charged with emergency operations planning and another agency is responsible for all other issues.

Regardless of who has responsibility for state-level school safety issues, participants discussed a number of challenges pertaining to working with schools. For example, it is not uncommon for school principals or superintendents to need a great deal of training on school safety. Given their wide range of responsibilities, they may not recall what is in their EOP or they may have limited knowledge of the SRO's role in the school. When the SSSC does not have explicit authority to enforce state mandates, it can be difficult for them to get schools to be responsive to state mandates. This is a particular concern in two instances: (1) for private and charter schools and (2) for those schools whose administrators feel overwhelmed with carrying out other responsibilities. Some participants reported that when schools are not responsive, they remind schools of the liabilities they may face or negative media coverage that may result if a school safety tragedy occurs. Further, participants noted that variations in schools, such as location in an urban or rural setting or general awareness of school safety issues, means that flexibility is needed regarding when and how training or other assistance is provided to schools. Although there is a great need for training, it is difficult to schedule trainings for teachers during the summer and when substitute teachers are scarce during the school year.

Because school principals do not want to take actions that could contribute to the school-to-prison pipeline, some SSSCs were concerned that students' actions may not be reported to law enforcement when they should be. Some SSSC staff have heard that some school principals feel pressure not to report student misbehavior to the SRO to avoid formal law enforcement involvement that contributes to the school-to-prison pipeline. This raised concerns among some participants that students may be getting away with behavior that should be brought

to the attention of law enforcement. These issues served as evidence that school administrators need to be trained on the roles and functions of SROs.

Special Topics

We have already discussed many school safety-related topics that SSSCs address. For some of these topics (and others that have not yet been discussed), it is a particular challenge to provide guidance and training, and to set policy or handle the issues in another manner. This may occur when the topic involved is a new issue, when SSSCs are unable to identify resources or information that would help address it, or when it raises very strong differing opinions.

Topics that are a particular challenge for SSSCs to address include:

- **Firearms.** Developing policies associated with who, when, and where school teachers or others can carry a firearm on a school campus is particularly sensitive for those states where the legislature has permitted it.

- **SRO roles.** Addressing the roles of SROs on campus has been challenging for some SSSCs. Participants reported that some schools want SROs and others do not. SSSCs are concerned about misperceptions, fueled by media stories on SROs, about what SROs can or should do.

- **Adult sexual misconduct.** Dealing with adult sexual misconduct toward students, including teacher misconduct, is an increasing concern.

- **Substance use or abuse.** Legalization of marijuana is a concern in several states including those where marijuana is illegal. Participants stated that many

students are under the impression that it is legal to use marijuana when it is not. Also, some students think that marijuana is not harmful because it is legal in some places. Participants felt that schools were not always prepared to respond to students who are addicted to drugs.

- **School bomb threats.** Several participants noted an increase in school bomb threats and hoaxes. They want to respond to these threats appropriately without causing unnecessary disruptions to the school day.

- **Private and charter schools.** A number of participants noted that these schools are often not subject to state legislation regarding school safety. They raised concerns about not having school safety data from private and charter schools.

- **Cybersecurity.** Participants expressed concerns about the threat of cyberattacks on student data systems.

- **Human trafficking.** Human trafficking in schools is an emerging concern. As such, interested SSSCs are beginning to learn how to identify victims and have begun working with others who have more experience on this issue.

- **Violent extremism.** There are concerns about disenfranchised youth and how to address students who may become radicalized and involved in terrorism. SSSCs are uncertain about what information on violent extremism to share with school personnel, and how to share it.

- **Home life.** What happens at home influences student behavior at school. It can be challenging to get family support to address negative behavior or behavioral health issues, and to stay informed about problems at home.

- **Social media.** Student use of cellphones and other devices to make threats or bully students, at school or elsewhere, is an increasing concern. SSSCs are unsure about the best way to proceed with policies and practices regarding issues such as social media usage at school and how to monitor and respond to threatening online posts.

- **Gang awareness.** Stakeholders need to better understand gangs and how to respond to their presence in and around schools and students.

Knowledge and Other Resources

SSSCs noted a number of areas in which they would like to improve their knowledge and maximize available resources. This, in turn, would help them as they work with stakeholders to improve school safety in their state.

Regulations governing information sharing under the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) have led to confusion for both SSSCs and school administrators regarding the circumstances under which it is permissible to share student data. FERPA is relevant to school safety in instances when, for example, a school wants to share the results of a student threat assessment with others.

Although SSSCs are generally aware of the school safety efforts in their state, they find it difficult to learn about efforts in other states or at the federal level. They posited that increased awareness of work in other states, as well as the federal government, would help them refine and make decisions about how to proceed with school safety efforts in their own state. A number of participants noted that it is challenging to take time to share information about the work in their state as well as seek out information on the work in other states.

This problem may be compounded because SSSCs often find it difficult to maintain current websites that accurately reflect their activities.

Another issue is the use of federal school safety resources. Participants reported that guidance from one federal agency occasionally conflicts with that from another agency, making it difficult to obtain needed information.

SSSCs raised a number of concerns related to data and measurement. Data collected and reported by federal agencies — such as the School Survey on Crime and Safety reported in the annual *Indicators of School Crime and Safety* report (Zhang et al., 2016) — only report findings on a national level. Not surprisingly, SSSCs would like to see estimates on the state level to improve relevancy to their state's school safety issues. A number of SSSCs would like to use data more frequently to make an argument about a pressing problem or the need for a particular solution, but they find it difficult to use data from these federal collections for this purpose. Specifically, they found it was difficult to translate statistics to recommendations for policy and practice. Another concern is related to measuring the effectiveness of prevention efforts. That is, some SSSCs are not sure how to define or determine when their work prevented a school safety problem. In addition, SSSCs want to ensure that the tools they use to perform tasks such as threat assessment are valid, but they are not sure how to proceed with threat assessment while waiting for validation efforts to be completed.

SSSCs respond to the challenges they face on a regular basis and have devised approaches to overcome them. However, SSSCs have identified a number of areas that are particularly ripe for change, and they are seeking guidance and support from other stakeholders to address these issues.

Desired Policy, Program, and Practice Changes

To better address the safety of schools and students, SSSCs identified a number of policies, practices, or programs they wanted to change. Discussions highlighted desired changes in the areas of collaboration, event-driven policy and legislation, and the roles of local, state, and federal agencies. Stakeholders in school safety can play a key role in bringing about these changes.

Collaboration

We have already discussed the strong emphasis SSSCs place on the importance of collaboration for enhancing school safety. We raise it again because, although collaboration often takes place, participants noted the ongoing reliance on "silos" of activity and communication both within school districts and between LEAs and other professionals in the community. One participant stated that she spent a lot of time working to get school officials to engage with other community public safety and social service agencies. For example, participants noted that school principals frequently work alone to assess safety concerns and risks inside their schools. In addition, there is a more general need to build relationships, learn about and consider different approaches, and improve information sharing; this includes information sharing among states. Several SSSCs have initiated a monthly conference call among state school safety representatives to share information and ideas. The group expressed support for more formalized and extensive collaboration across states and discussed the possibility of launching a professional association that could also serve to advance the concerns and priorities of state school safety professionals. Threat assessment is an example of a topic that meeting attendees

Threat Assessment

Threat assessment is a school safety concern that was discussed in detail. Educators, law enforcement, and others concerned about school safety are continuously grappling with the challenges of identifying, assessing, and responding appropriately to potential safety threats. Meeting participants indicated that practitioners need better training and awareness; improved clarity regarding terminology and definitions; and improved authority and written policies around issues such as how to handle sensitive information, how to communicate with parents, and how to proceed with and without parental consent. Moving forward, they recommend a strong focus on threats to both self and others and the introduction of innovative training techniques (e.g., using video clips) for teachers and other school personnel.

reported could be better addressed with improved collaboration; see the highlight box for more details.

Event-Driven Policy and Legislation

Participants were frustrated about the tendency for legislators and policymakers to act precipitously following a school safety incident. They described how this event-driven legislation was often rushed and put them in the position of continuously responding to the "tragedy of the month." This diminishes their ability to work toward more strategic, sustained, and comprehensive school safety approaches. Although concerns about event-driven policies and legislation are not unique to professionals involved in school safety, it appears that the impact is exacerbated by the relatively small number of professionals dedicated to school safety at the state level combined with the high level of public interest and urgency placed on school safety issues. Although participants voiced many concerns about the development of school safety legislation and policies, they are particularly concerned about event-driven legislation and policies but did not identify any solutions to address this issue.

Roles of Local, State, and Federal Agencies

SSSCs place a strong emphasis on the importance of local empowerment and innovation. Participants indicated that more could be done to empower local school safety professionals and stakeholders to develop tailored and appropriate approaches to issues such as improving school climate and preventing school violence. Participants noted that it is not always possible for them to support academic studies and rigorous program evaluations to identify what works; however, they may be empowered by having better access to and information about research and program evaluations of similar efforts in other locations. Further, participants pointed to professional learning communities and developments in implementation science and change management as important options and resources for increasing local capacity.

Participants said they would like to see SEAs make school safety a greater priority in general, and noted that SEAs could make important contributions to providing resources that empower LEAs. One example is the need for a systematic framework for collecting school safety data with consistent and clearly defined terminology and guidance about information sharing.

Participants also suggested that SEAs are well positioned to provide better oversight and ensure accountability on issues such as locally developed EOPs. For example, they suggested that states could be more active in incentivizing, reviewing, and rating local EOPs.

Although schools have benefited from a number of federal programs over the years (e.g., guidance on developing EOPs, information to help develop trainings), SSSCs were concerned about the inconsistency of these federal programs and activities over time. In addition to greater consistency in federal resources, participants would like to see improved coordination across federal agencies. Participants expressed a desire for the creation of a federal school safety center to address this concern.

Information on What Works

SSSCs want information on what works in school safety. Notably, at the meeting a number of participants were introduced to Crimesolutions.gov, the Office of Justice Programs' clearinghouse of evidence-based practices in criminal justice. Regarding threat assessment, participants seek information on validated tools. They are also interested in what works to improve school climate inside and outside the classroom. In the area of EOPs, they want information about how to work with rural communities. Finally, in regard to school discipline, they are particularly interested in efforts to reduce disproportionate minority contact and divert students from the justice system.

Conclusion

Over the course of the two-day meeting, SSSCs shared a great deal of information

about the opportunities and the challenges they face. SSSCs play a key role in helping to improve school safety in the schools across their states and engage in a wide variety of activities to accomplish this. They face challenges from various sources in doing this work and have many ideas about what they and others could do to help improve school safety.

Although SSSCs share many common characteristics, they differ in terms of the tasks they carry out and the challenges they face due to factors such as the organization in which they reside and the political environment in which they exist. Nevertheless, working with stakeholders; collaborating with key partners; considering the roles of local, state, and federal agencies; using available resources wisely; delivering training; and planning are themes that apply to the work of all SSSCs.

SSSCs have developed a number of solutions to improve school safety. This takes many forms, including organizing trainings and conferences to share knowledge with the goal of improving work carried out by school staff, developing plans to prevent school safety incidents, and implementing strategies to meet new legislative requirements. SSSCs may work alone or reach out to other SSSCs, researchers, schools, state and federal governments, or others to develop solutions.

SSSCs regularly face challenges without an identifiable solution. Some of these challenges have persisted over time, but others are relatively recent. Topics such as recent legislation associated with carrying firearms on school campuses, working with charter schools, and developing policies related to student social media use may be difficult because they represent new areas of concern and there has been little time to develop expertise and knowledge on

these topics. Others, such as event-driven policy legislation, may be difficult to resolve because SSSCs have little control over preventing them. However, some persistent challenges, such as responses to bomb threats and the role of SROs, may be settled by testing solutions to address them. To overcome many of these challenges, SSSCs would like to see greater coordination with each other, increased support from SEAs, and expanded and transparent information on what works from researchers and the federal government.

State school safety centers do a lot to address our nation's school safety concerns. They have made great strides in working with schools and other stakeholders; however, they believe that with better support from each other, researchers, and those in state and federal governments, they can do even more.

References

American Institutes for Research. (n.d.). *School Climate* (Washington, DC: American Institutes for Research)*,* https://safesupportivelearning.ed.gov/school-climate.

Fronius, T., Persson, H. Guckenburg, S., Hurley, N., & Petrosino, A. (2016). *Restorative Justice in U.S. Schools: A Research Review* (San Francisco, CA: WestEd), http://jprc.wested.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/RJ_Literature-Review_20160217.pdf.

Georgia Department of Education. (n.d.). *School Climate* (Atlanta, GA: Georgia Department of Education), https://www.gadoe.org/External-Affairs-and-Policy/Policy/Pages/School-Climate.aspx.

Heath, M.A., Ryan, K., Dean, B., & Bingham, R. (2007). "History of School Safety and Psychological First Aid for Children," *Brief Treatment and Crisis Intervention* 7(3): 206-223, http://btci.edina.clockss.org/cgi/content/abstract/7/3/206.

Powell, A. National Governors Association Center for Best Practices. "Overview of School Safety and Security Survey," memorandum to Governors Homeland Security Advisors Council, February 2, 2016.

U.S. Department of Education, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, Office of Safe and Healthy Students. (2013). *Guide for Developing High-Quality School Emergency Operations Plans* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education), https://rems.ed.gov/docs/REMS_K-12_Guide_508.pdf.

Zhang, A., Musu-Gillette, L., & Oudekerk, B.A. (2016). *Indicators of School Crime and Safety: 2015* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics; and U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics), NCES 2016-079/NCJ 249758, http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2016/2016079.pdf.

NIJ
National Institute of Justice

Meeting on State School Safety Issues

Santa Fe, New Mexico • February 9-10, 2016

Agenda

Day One

February 9, 2016

9:00 am	Welcome and Introductions
	○ Phelan Wyrick, National Institute of Justice
	○ Lisa Hecker, New Mexico Public Education Department
10:00 am	Overview of State Efforts on School Safety
	○ Mary Poulin Carlton, National Institute of Justice
10:15 am	Break
10:30 am	Guided Panel Discussion 1
	○ Bill Modzeleski, Moderator
	○ Kathy Martinez-Prather, Texas
	○ Christine Harms, Colorado
	○ Anne Gilligan, Massachusetts
11:30 am	Audience Questions and Comments to Panel
11:45 am	School Safety Data Collections
	○ Rachel Morgan, Bureau of Justice Statistics
	Trends in School Safety
	○ Barbara Oudekerk, Bureau of Justice Statistics
12:30 pm	Lunch (on your own)
2:00 pm	Recap of Morning Discussion
2:15 pm	Participant Selection of Break Out Group
2:30 pm	Break Out Discussions
4:30 pm	Recap and Plan for Day Two
5:00 pm	Adjourn

Comprehensive School Safety Initiative

National Institute of Justice

Day Two

February 10, 2016

9:00 am	Day One Recap and Review of Today's Agenda
9:15 am	Guided Panel Discussion 2
	o Bill Modzeleski, Moderator
	o Edward Clarke, Maryland
	o Donna Michaelis, Virginia
	o Mike Keefe, New York
10:15 am	Audience Questions and Comments to Panel
10:30 am	Break
10:45 am	A "Comprehensive Model" for School Safety
	o Group Discussion
11:30 am	Break Out Group 1 Presentation
11:45 am	Break Out Group 2 Presentation
12:00 pm	Lunch (on your own)
1:30 pm	How the Readiness and Emergency Management for Schools Technical Assistance Center Meets the Needs of the Field
	o Bronwyn Roberts, REMS TA Center
2:00 pm	Break Out Group 3 Presentation
2:15 pm	Break Out Group 4 Presentation
2:30 pm	Open Discussion on Group Presentations
3:00 pm	Break
3:15 pm	Final Group Discussion: Takeaways and Other Issues of Concern
3:45 pm	Closing Comments
4:00 pm	Adjourn

Comprehensive School Safety Initiative