



The Effectiveness of Anonymous Reporting Systems in America and Factors that influence Reporting

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Abstract

Gun violence in America continues to rise, with school shootings increasing in frequency and severity. Because many perpetrators are members of the school communities they attack, identifying potential shooters within schools is a critical prevention strategy. Research shows that perpetrators often display observable warning signs, making the recognition and reporting of such signs essential for preventing gun violence. In response, many organizations and states have introduced anonymous reporting systems that allow staff, students, and community members to share concerns which are evaluated by trained assessment teams. This paper evaluates the effectiveness of school-based reporting systems in preventing school shootings as well as the school-related factors that influence whether individuals report warning signs. Drawing on an in-depth literature review, the findings indicate that while evidence remains limited, anonymous reporting systems show promise in reducing the risk of targeted school violence. The results suggest that these systems play a crucial role in prevention and should be seriously considered by school administrations seeking to enhance campus safety.

Introduction

Over the past few decades, gun violence in America continued to increase sharply. In 2021 the Federal Bureau of Investigation published their findings, including a reported 61 shootings in America, which represents a 52.5% increase from 2020 and a 96.8% increase from 2017 (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2022). Their findings highlight the significant rise in gun violence. As gun violence in the U.S. rises, the number of school shootings has also drastically increased, doubling just over the last two decades (Rossin-Slater, 2023). Additionally, over 100,000 American children attended schools where shootings occurred between 2018 and 2019, further demonstrating the significant rise in school shootings (Rossin-Slater, 2023). In comparison to other major industrialized nations combined, the U.S. experiences 57 times as many school shootings, demonstrating the severe crisis in the United States (Rapa et al., 2024).

The ongoing rise in school shootings has led to various responses, including calling for more common-sense gun laws, arming school resource officers, and installing surveillance systems (Safe2Tell, 2024; Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency [CISA], 2018). Yet research suggests that relying solely on physical security measures such as drills and metal detectors is “insufficient” without strategies aimed at preventing potential shooters from entering schools in the first place (Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency, 2018).

Most school shooters have a connection to the school community; an analysis by Everytown of New York City Police Department data shows 75% of shooters were current or former students (Everytown, 2024). Additionally, Everytown notes that warning signs raised concerns in individuals in 100% of cases of targeted school violence (Everytown, 2024). Despite warning signs, four out of five school shootings in America involved at least one person who was aware of the attacker’s plan but failed to report it (Sandy Hook Promise, n.d.). The clear reluctance in individuals who could have potentially helped prevent shootings to report highlights

the urgent need to understand school-related factors that influence whether students and staff report warning signs to prevent future tragedies.

Schools have implemented various reporting tools—such as anonymous apps like FortifyFL—yet, the systems are often underutilized or misused (Everytown, 2024; Pew Research Center, 2024). As of 2020, “there were 26 states that mandated the availability of an anonymous reporting system for public schools,” which, despite progress, still leaves nearly half of the United States without a mandated reporting system (National Center for School Safety, 2020). While school-based reporting systems have the potential to prevent shootings, their success depends on critical school-related factors: trusted adults, school climate, mental health support, and training on recognizing warning signs (Sandy Hook Promise, 2023; Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2022; BBC, 2023).

This paper investigates the effectiveness of school-based reporting systems in preventing school shootings and examines the factors within schools that influence whether students and staff report warning signs. In several cases individuals who did report concerning behavior were able to prevent potential acts of violence, underscoring the importance of reporting systems. Yet a variety of factors can either motivate individuals from reporting suspicious behavior or discourage them from doing so. Understanding these dynamics is essential to improving prevention efforts and ensuring that warning signs do not go unnoticed or unreported. Ultimately, the aim of this paper is to evaluate the strengths and limitations of current school-based reporting systems and to identify the psychological, social, and institutional factors that influence whether students and staff choose to report potential threats.

II. What do Modern Reporting Systems Utilized in Schools Look Like?

Anonymous reporting systems, otherwise referred to as “ARS,” as defined by Dr. Elizabeth (Libby) Messman et al. (2022), research investigator at the University of Michigan, are violence prevention strategy tools; ARS allow staff and students within a school community to safely report concerns or suspicious behavior through programs like apps, hotlines, confidential conversations, or websites (Messman et al., 2022). ARS provides “a safe and anonymous way” to intervene before violence occurs by allowing individuals to share information without fear of retaliation or exposure (Hsieh et al., 2022). In an interview published by the National Center for School Safety, based out of the University of Michigan, Messman explains how “an anonymous reporting system is a way for students, teachers, and community members to report concerns about themselves or report threats of violence,” typically using SMS, apps, or online forms (National Center for School Safety, 2025). She emphasizes, “the main thing is that the tips that come in are anonymous, so the reporter is never identified,” which is especially important for breaking down barriers of fear, mistrust, or the “code of silence,” a term often used to explain the reluctance in individuals to report information (National Center for School Safety, 2025). While ARS vary in design, most fall in several common categories: third-party apps like FortifyFL and STOPit; mandated systems that route tips to law enforcement, such as Safe2Tell; or school-managed tools like TIPS that involve school staff, trusted adults and multidisciplinary threat assessment teams (National Center for School Safety, 2025; Hsieh et al., 2022).

As of 2020, 26 states had enacted laws requiring ARS in public schools, with notable statewide models including FortifyFL in Florida, Say Something in North Carolina and Pennsylvania, and Colorado’s Safe2Tell, developed in the wake of the Columbine shooting

(National Center for School Safety, 2025; Hsieh et al., 2022). These apps allow individuals to report suspicious behavior to school officials, local law enforcement, and state-level authorities, who evaluate the tip and take appropriate action in response.(Safe2Tell, 2024). Additionally, data from these systems can inspire future recommendations or bills that ensure safer environments (Safe2Tell, 2024).

Despite their growing presence, ARS still face critical limitations. Evidence on the effectiveness of ARS is inadequate, as also noted by Messman in her interview, who states that that “there’s a whole lot of different types of anonymous reporting systems and wide variation in implementation, so there’s still a lot we don’t know about what makes them effective and why” (National Center for School Safety, 2025). Without proper training on the usage of ARS, such as how to report suspicious behavior, ARS often become underutilized, hindering their potential for growth and to be used adequately (see section IV. B).

III. School-Related Factors That Influence Reporting

There are a number of factors that influence whether students, school faculty, and community members utilize reporting systems. The following sections will explore four main factors that have been implicated: trust in adults, school climate, mental health support, and training and awareness. This in-depth examination highlights both the challenges and opportunities for maximizing the effectiveness of reporting systems.

A. Trust in Adults

A key determinant of whether students report warning signs is their level of trust in teachers and school staff, like librarians, coaches, tutors, school counselors, or administrators. Research from the U.S. Secret Service highlights that 94% of school shooters communicated their plans or exhibited warning behaviors prior to attacks; however, many of these signs went unreported due to students’ fear of judgment, punishment, or inaction by adults (U.S. Secret Service, 2021). This reluctance to report underscores the critical role that trusted adult relationships play in effective school-based violence prevention. Effective student-teacher relationships involve substantial trust, which functions as a necessary foundation for students’ social emotional development and school engagement (Demerath et al., 2022). In a data review about teachers in high schools in the United States earning trust from students, lead researcher Peter Demerath et al., an associate professor in the University of Minnesota’s Department of Organizational Leadership, Policy, and Development, emphasizes that trust in teachers is a precursor to students’ sense of belonging and academic involvement, both of which supports a safer and more communicative school environment.

The quality of these relationships directly influences whether students feel comfortable disclosing sensitive information or concerns. Without perceived trustworthiness, even well-designed reporting systems remain underutilized and hence ineffective. Demerath’s findings suggest that the efficacy of safety measures depends heavily on students’ perceptions of their relationships with educators, further implying that if students do not appraise these interactions as trustworthy or supportive, they are less likely to report warning signs. This

research indicates that trust is not merely a background factor but an active, interpretive process shaping student behavior and willingness to report suspicious behavior.

B. School Climate

School climate refers to student-teacher relationships, availability of school resources, student mental health, and violence that occurs on school grounds significantly impacts students' willingness to report warning signs. Factors such as bullying, a toxic culture, and the fear of being labeled a "snitch" create barriers to reporting, while positive, inclusive, environments foster greater likelihood of communication between students and teachers. Supported by the United States Department of Justice, hostile school climates, like those with limited support for teacher and student relationships, often discourage students from sharing concerns (National Institute of Justice , 2024).

Beyond relationships, the fear of social stigma and retaliation, as students worry about damaging peer relationships or being ostracized, often discourages students from reporting suspicious behavior.

To combat tense school climates schools can promote inclusivity and respect which often result in higher levels of trust and communication amongst students, which are critical elements for effective threat reporting (National Institute of Justice, 2024). A study conducted in 2023 by the National Institute of Justice (NIJ), evaluating the effectiveness of Sandy Hook Promise's "Say Something" program, revealed that implementation of the program helped prevent declines in measures of self-efficacy and overall school climate throughout the academic year (National Institute of Justice, 2024). Considering the school climate improved after the program was installed, it can be inferred that targeted interventions can help increase communication within school environments (National Institute of Justice, 2024).

The importance of belonging and climate is underscored by research on marginalized students, who, according to Gregory Walton (as cited in Demerath et al., 2022), often face systemic barriers to belonging and are "vigilant for cues that could communicate they do not belong," impeding their willingness to engage with adults or report threats. While marginalized students may be reluctant to engage with adults about issues unrelated to suspicious behavior, belonging is a necessary precondition for students to feel comfortable making any report. Encouraging an inclusive community is essential to building a strong relationship between teachers and students that, in the case of suspicious behavior, can encourage more reporting (Demerath et al., 2022). Moreover, even brief social belonging interventions have been shown to have "profound effects" on students' perceptions of inclusion, which then prompt improvements in academic engagement, motivation, and success (Demerath et al., 2022). These findings emphasize the potential of relatively short-term programs to shift school climate positively, which are necessary for reporting systems to be effective.

C. Mental Health Professionals

Involving mental health professionals with the ARS process can be significantly helpful for identifying potential warning signs among students who are at risk for displaying violent behavior. According to the National Institute of Justice, anonymous reporting systems (ARS)



often serve as initial access points for identifying warning signs tied to mental health, including bullying, depression, anxiety, and social isolation (National Institute of Justice, 2024). These warning signs can be better addressed when schools pair ARS with trained mental health professionals who can respond appropriately to reports. While data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2024) suggests that the number of schools training staff on strategies for recognizing mental health disorders may be declining to 67% of trained staff—down from 72% just two years earlier in 2019-2020—schools should still push to implement mental health professionals to help guide usage of ARS.

Additionally, a study published on Pew Research by Kiley Hurst, a social and demographic research analyst, reveals that most teachers in the United States (69%) say improving mental health screening and treatment for children and adults would be extremely or very effective (Hurst, 2024). In addition to using data from their 2022 survey of 3,757 U.S. parents, Pew surveyed 2,531 U.S. public K-12 teachers who are members of RAND's American Teacher Panel, which is "a national representative panel of public school K-12 teachers recruited through MDR Education" (Hurst, 2024). Other reporting systems, however, were not as favorable. Of the teachers surveyed, 49% say having police officers or armed security in schools would be highly effective, while 33% say the same about metal detectors in schools (Hurst, 2024). While the statistics may just be opinions, considering that most teachers (69%) believe mental health support would be extremely effective, it can be inferred that implementing such support would be widely accepted in schools. By integrating reporting with emotional and psychological care, schools are better positioned to prevent crises before they materialize.

The presence of mental health professionals in school communities also plays a major factor into whether students and staff feel safe enough—and supported enough—to report concerns. Mental health professionals can help guide the students who report through ARS. Through reporting, students can be connected with mental health professionals who can serve as support systems for students throughout their reporting process (National Institute of Justice, 2024).

D. Training and Awareness

Training is a critical component in ensuring that school-based reporting systems (SBRS) function effectively. Without proper education, both students and staff may overlook the early warning signs displayed by potential shooters, allowing opportunities for intervention to pass by unnoticed. Research suggests that the success of a reporting tool depends on the training behind its usage. As researcher Justin Heinze noted in a National Institute of Justice interview, "it is not true that 'if you build it, they will come'" (National Institute of Justice, 2024). Heinze suggests that schools must actively train individuals on what to look for and how to respond in order to see success. Further supporting the difference training makes, a 2023 NIJ study includes that "students who got trained had better outcomes than students at the same schools who didn't get trained." Considering that training directly influenced student confidence in recognizing warning signs and knowing how to act, it can be concluded that awareness-building is a fundamental part of encouraging the usage of reporting systems. Researchers from the University of Virginia School of Education and Human Development's Youth Policy Project also reinforce the importance of training (University of Virginia, n.d.). The Comprehensive School



Threat Assessment Guidelines (CSTAG), formerly the Virginia Student Threat Assessment Guidelines, is an evidence-based framework for K-12 schools to perform behavioral threat assessments. Developed in 2001 by Dr. Dewey Cornell and his University of Virginia colleagues, it has undergone extensive field tests and controlled studies proving its effectiveness. Widely implemented in Virginia and across the U.S., CSTAG earned recognition as an evidence-based program from the National Registry of Evidence-based Programs and Practices in 2013. Supporting that training on using ARS does make a difference in school communities, a pre-post survey study of 351 school staff members who participated in the Virginia workshop conducted by the University of Virginia shows that following the training staff felt less fearful about the potential of a school shooter entering campus, and were “more willing” to utilize systems like the ARS in assessing conflicts. (University of Virginia, n.d. from Allen, Cornell, Lorek, & Sheras, 2008). These findings further suggest that when educators are trained to recognize and assess warning signs, they can intervene before violence occurs—improving both student safety and support. As similarly noted in a study assessing Colorado’s Safe2Tell system, schools with thorough training reported more credible, specific tips that led to more timely and effective interventions (Messman et al., 2022). All of these studies underscore a consistent pattern: when a school community is not trained to use even the finest-designed reporting systems, their effectiveness is limited.

Also demonstrating the importance of training, California saw ERPO use increase by 538% between 2018 and 2023 after Mara Elliot, Advocate of ERPOs, expanded training on recognizing risky behavior and requesting ERPOs to schools, medical professionals, mental health experts, and over 500 law enforcement agencies (Everytown, 2024). Everytown, which advocates for common sense gun laws but shares fact-checked statistics about gun violence, also found no evidence of ERPO respondents later committing homicides or suicides, suggesting education and training are effective in preventing firearm-related deaths. While ERPOs are legal tools used primarily by adults—not school-based reporting systems for students—this case still illustrates how broad education on risk identification can dramatically improve the use of preventive safety tools. While ERPOs are part of the legal system and may not be directly comparable to anonymous student tip lines, both systems rely on a similar prerequisite: someone recognizing and reporting a warning sign (Everytown, 2024). Thus, California’s ERPO data reinforces a central takeaway: education and training across sectors, including schools, can lead to earlier, life-saving interventions. Ultimately, effective reporting cannot exist without knowledge (Messman et al., 2022).

IV. Do School-Based Reporting Systems Work?

A. Evidence of Success

While studies assessing reporting systems may be limited, available research does support that school-based reporting systems are effective in preventing potential incidents of violence on school grounds. Sandy Hook Promise reports that anonymous tips sent to their crisis center have been successful in preventing over 60 planned school attacks and 67 potential shootings. To address the challenge of measuring prevented incidents, researchers define a “prevented” attack as one where credible tips—detailing specific plans, targets, or weapon access—lead to interventions like law enforcement action or mental health support,

neutralizing the threat before violence occurs, as seen in the U.S. Secret Service's analysis of 67 averted plots from 2006-2018. For example, in 2020 the University of Virginia received a U.S. Department of Justice grant to study student threat assessment implementation in Florida public schools. The study, led by researcher Jennifer Maeng, revealed of the 23,135 student threat assessments conducted during the 2021-2022 academic year that they reviewed, 94.1% of threats were not carried out, and only 0.23% resulted in serious injury, demonstrating the effectiveness of CSTAG training and reporting systems in preventing escalation to violence (Maeng et al., 2023).

Further demonstrating the effectiveness of reporting systems in school communities, a randomized controlled trial conducted across 19 middle schools in Miami-Dade County, which involved over 700 students, found that the Say Something Anonymous Reporting System improved students' confidence and willingness to report warning signs within three months of implementation. Additionally, the system reduced exposure to violence and increased perceptions of school safety after nine months (National Institute of Justice, 2024). The study also noted a decrease in student-reported encounters with violence and improvements in self-efficacy related to threat recognition and reporting in schools using the Say Something system. Compared to students who did not receive training, trained students had better outcomes with reporting (National Institute of Justice, 2024). While the data is based on self-reports from the students, researchers emphasize that these results still represent a preliminary step in evaluating the program's overall effectiveness.

Also demonstrating the effectiveness of implementing ARS, Messman et al. (2022) includes a study assessing includes in her findings that a study assessing Colorado's Safe2Tell system used data from six years of the system, finding that from 2004 to 2010, 8,905 calls were made to the tipline and 2,961 reports were confirmed as credible. More than 75% of the credible tips resulted in an intervention, which led to "415 formal investigations, 359 counseling referrals, 298 prevention/intervention plans, 324 suicide interventions, 312 school disciplinary actions, 74 arrests, and 28 prevented school attacks" (Messman et al., 2022 from Payne and Elliott, 2011). Given that 75% of the reports made to the Safe2Tell system resulted in interventions, it can be inferred that such systems are effective in preventing potential tragedies. Despite limited research, standing evidence supports that ARS can help prevent gun violence in schools in America.

B. Limitations to the Reporting Systems

Despite promising results, school-based anonymous reporting systems can be limited when not used accurately. Specifically, one concern is the potential misuse of tip lines, including prank reports or false accusations intended to bully or harm a student's reputation. However, studies do suggest that such false reporting is rare, and the chance of misuse tends to decrease once students understand that the TIPS system is taken seriously and incorrect usage results in negative consequences (National Institute of Justice, 2024).

Another challenge with the reporting systems is sustainability. As Justin Heinze notes, an associate professor at the school of Public Health at the University of Michigan, the implementation of these systems is not an easy one-time purchase. Instead, long-term success requires ongoing investments in student training and program maintenance, which can strain



school budgets. While Heinze does estimate that the cost of the Say Something system is under \$3,000 annually per school—and argued it may be a highly cost-effective way to prevent violence, especially compared to the societal cost of \$2,200 to \$15,100 per school-based incident—budget constraints remain a barrier for many districts (National Institute of Justice, 2024). Considering many schools already struggle with budgeting, spending money on such systems may not be a priority for many schools, making the expansion of implementation of these systems harder in such schools.

Additionally, some systems, like FortifyFL have faced criticism for vague protocols and unclear follow-up, leading to public distrust. Considering that systems are more likely to fail when people do not use or trust them, as Heinze explains, the effectiveness of systems like FortifyFI can be limited considering the public has been critical (National Institute of Justice, 2024). These cases underscore that the presence of a reporting system alone is not sufficient; consistent enforcement, trust-building, and responsive action are critical to their success

C. Key Takeaway

Anonymous reporting systems have the potential to prevent school violence, but their success depends on more than just implementation. Students must be taught how to recognize and report warning signs and to trust that their reports will be taken seriously and acted upon (Demerath et al., 2022). Without trust and training, the effectiveness of reporting systems is impeded.

VII. Recommendations

To enhance the effectiveness of ARS in school communities and prevent potential incidents of school violence, including shootings, schools should adopt a comprehensive approach that strengthens trust between students and staff through advisory programs, mental health liaisons, and designated trusted adults. Additionally, reporting systems must be paired with mental health support to connect students with help, rather than just punishment, an idea emphasized by the National Center for School Safety (National Center for School Safety, 2020), which states, “reporting should connect students with help, not just punishment.” Integrating training on recognizing warning signs into regular school culture is crucial. For example, programs like Sandy Hook Promise’s “Say Something” integrated as a regular part of school culture, in 2021–22 88% of schools already trained staff in bullying, violence, and substance use (NCES, 2024). Finally, schools should clarify reporting protocols by defining what to report and what happens following their reporting, increasing trust and promoting communication, all leading to a smoother reporting process and encouraging timely interventions.

VIII. Conclusion

At the core of this essay standing evidence, despite limited evidence, supports that school-based reporting systems are effective in preventing potential school shootings. With focus on factors such as school climate, trust in adults, mental health resources, comprehensive training, and proactive interventions, as evidenced by programs like CSTAG and Safe2Tell there have been thousands of threats resolved without escalation.



By shifting the initial contact with potential school shooters to preventative services, like identifying warning signs and taking the proper steps to encourage reports, school administration, government officials, classmates, and families are able to address deeper rooted issues prior to a deadly event taking place.

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