

PREPARING FOR THE UNTHINKABLE:

How are Santa Barbara County Schools Preparing to Prevent or Minimize the Effects of a Potential Mass Shooting?

SUMMARY

Children are our most precious resource. Since the Columbine High School tragedy in 1999 there have been over 400 school shooting incidents resulting not only in over 200 children and educators dead, but close to an additional 400,000 children directly exposed to these horrors and countless others traumatized through media coverage and overly realistic active shooter drills.

The likelihood of such a shooting occurring is extremely low. But the consequences are so devastating that every community needs to take every precaution within reason to prevent or minimize it.

This report addresses the measures that Santa Barbara County schools take to reduce the chances that such a shooting will occur on their campuses and to minimize damage should an active shooter arrive on their campus. It addresses measures to: (a) identify a potential perpetrator and take appropriate action; (b) build security on campus that prevents the perpetrator from gaining access or reduces the damage he or she is able to achieve once on campus; and, (c) encourage wellness programs to alleviate the problems leading one to violence.

The California Education Code (sections 32280-32289.6) requires every public school district in the state, grades K-12, to have a Comprehensive School Safety Plan. In districts with enrollments larger than 2,500, each school must have a distinct plan.

It appears that each Santa Barbara County school district has developed its plans on time and, as far as the Grand Jury has been able to ascertain, conducts drills for its teachers, staff, and students on the plan. Nevertheless, the Grand Jury has some recommendations to improve each school's readiness for the unimaginable tragedy should it come to their school.

The Grand Jury recommends that the County Education Office’s School Safety Seminar be recorded and placed online, that school districts require personnel to view it, and that administrators attend in person at least once every two years. It also recommends that school districts make sure to train every employee and student on campus. This includes substitute teachers and other temporary employees who could otherwise be overlooked.

The Grand Jury looked at the physical elements of school safety. First, it suggests that all County high schools employ School Resource Officers. It further recommends that every school have anonymous pathways, including physical drop-boxes, for students to report suspicious activity. It further recommends specific security measures for visitor access to the school premises, recognizing that most schools are following excellent procedures already. Nevertheless, the Grand Jury recommends that each school analyze its campus for sufficiency of video cameras, two-way communications devices, and other innovations in security against unwanted intrusions.

INTRODUCTION

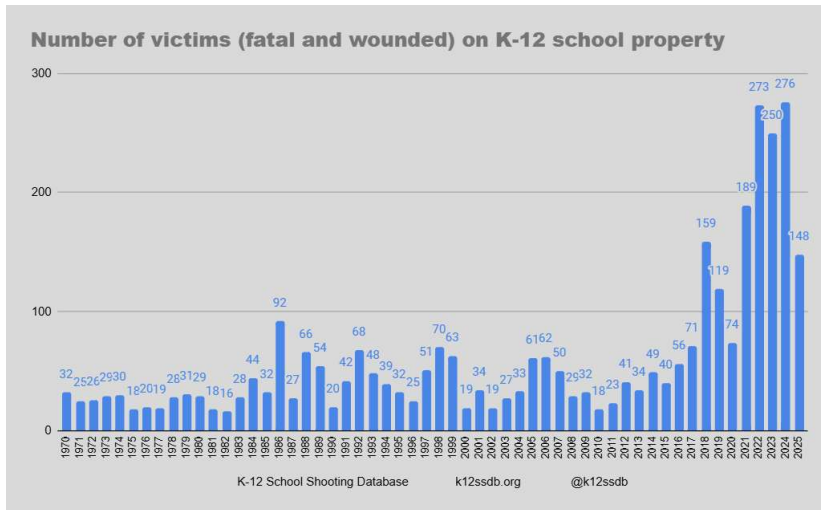
Mass shootings are a sad reality for 21st Century America. The Gun Violence Archive defines these as a “4 or more shot or killed, not including the shooter.”¹ Many of these horrors are perpetrated in the nation’s schools. Although tracking of targeted school shootings started in the 1960’s, this phenomenon has risen to national attention mostly since the Columbine High School shootings in 1999 and high profile shootings thereafter, as shown in the following:²

¹ <https://www.gunviolencearchive.org/methodology>, accessed June 3, 2026.

² See *School Shootings in the United States: 1997–2022* — American Academy of Pediatrics (Pediatrics journal, 2024) <https://publications.aap.org/pediatrics/article/153/4/e2023064311/196816/School-Shootings-in-the-United-States-1997-2022> (accessed April 20, 2026); *Examining Trends, Impacts, Drivers, and Policy Implications of Active School Shooter Incidents* — Homeland Security Affairs (2023) <https://www.hsaj.org/articles/22337>, accessed April 20, 2026.

Year	Deaths	Location
1999	15	Columbine High School - Littleton, Colorado
2012	26	Sandy Hook Elementary - Newton, Connecticut
2018	17	Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School - Parkland, Florida
2022	21	Robb Elementary School – Uvalde, Texas

Furthermore, as the chart below shows³, the number of victims of such crimes has increased significantly in the period from 2018 to the present:



These horrors can come to any school in any part of the country. As the largest state, California has seen the most incidents in the country, leading to the concern: it's not if, but when. Santa Barbara County schools and law enforcement officials need to be prepared for the worst, at any time, and for the most part, they are.

The California Constitution, Article I, Section 28, subdivision (f)(1), guarantees California students and staff the right to attend and work in public schools that are safe,

³ <https://k12ssdb.org/all-shootings>, accessed April 20, 2026.

secure, and peaceful. In 2018, Governor Brown signed Assembly Bill 1747, School Safety Plans, which updated the Education Code (EC). The law requires the California Department of Education (CDE) to develop and post on its website best practices for reviewing and approving school safety plans.

Under EC Section 32280 et seq., the State Legislature directed each district to develop its Comprehensive School Safety Plan with school-site councils or planning committees, and, in any event, “in cooperation with local law enforcement agencies, community leaders, parents, pupils, teachers, administrators, classified employees, local emergency medical services personnel ..., and other persons who may be interested in the health and safety of pupils and the prevention of campus crime and violence”

The California Department of Education provides guidance and best practices for these plans. The Santa Barbara County Education Office provides a template for school districts within the County to draw on, has a School Safety Liaison Officer, and conducts a School Safety Seminar each year to explain state requirements and update best practices.

Each school district, which is governed by its own elected school board, creates its School Safety Plan in consultation with law enforcement and the broader school community, signed annually by each school principal or superintendent, and is generally available. Staff, teachers, and students are trained in the protocols and how to respond to all emergency situations on school grounds. This training includes personnel for before- and after-school supervised activities.

Schools must be prepared to respond to emergencies including natural and man-made hazards and strive to prevent violence and behavior issues that undermine safety and security.⁴ At the same time, schools need to provide a campus conducive to learning. While safety is always first, it is important that educators create an atmosphere where students are not overly traumatized by the threat of an unlikely event.

⁴ <https://www.cde.ca.gov/ls/ss/vp/cssp.asp>, accessed March 10, 2026. This is a State Department of Education website with guidelines for Comprehensive School Safety Plans.

Given the gravity of the consequences, should a school or its community not be prepared for a mass shooting, the Grand Jury investigated to get a sense of how schools were preparing for the worst, and whether the Grand Jury could provide recommendations to improve that preparation.

METHODOLOGY

The Grand Jury interviewed over 20 Santa Barbara County principals, assistant principals, counselors, superintendents, assistant superintendents, law enforcement officials, non-profit leaders, and academic experts. It visited some campuses, reviewed previous Grand Jury reports, reviewed police reports, and consulted online news articles. It consulted publications of the California Department of Education's Safe Schools and Violence Prevention Center and the Attorney General's Crime and Violence Prevention Center including "Safe Schools: A Planning Guide for Action."

Resources referenced also include:

- KFF (formerly Kaiser Family Foundation) website
- Riedman, David (2025) K-12 School Shooting Database, <https://k12ssdb.org/data-visualizations>
- [Targeted Violence | SchoolSafety.gov](https://www.schoolsafety.gov)
- California Education Code Sections 32280-32289.6
- FBI report, "The School Shooter: A Threat Assessment Perspective"
- RAND's report, "The Role and Impact of School Resource Officers"
- Michigan State University report, "Integrating School Resource Officers into School Safety Planning"
- Academic papers, reports, and documents from local and national non-profit organizations
- Attendance by two members of the Grand Jury at the annual Santa Barbara County Education Office's School Safety Seminar

DISCUSSION

The Grand Jury has chosen to look at the problem of school shootings in three areas:

- Identifying potential perpetrators and taking appropriate actions
- Building security on campus that prevents a perpetrator from gaining access or reduces the damage he or she is able to achieve once on campus
- Addressing wellness programs to alleviate the problems leading one to violence

As Mary Ellen O'Toole aptly expressed the problem for the FBI in 2000, school shootings are not just a law enforcement problem but impact and are impacted by families and communities as well. Out of a student's experiences comes "... values, prejudices, biases, emotions, and the student's responses to training, stress, and authority. His or her behavior at school is affected by the entire range of experiences and influences."⁵

School Shooters

Studies of school shooter profiles show that there are a wide variety of perpetrators and targets. Shootings can occur in wealthy as well as poor areas, at any time of day, and from all kinds of people. Shooters defy easy classification. As one scholar summarizes:

... Analyses report that half of the shooters were students or former students; the remainder had no relationship to the school, or their relationship was unknown (GAO, 2020).

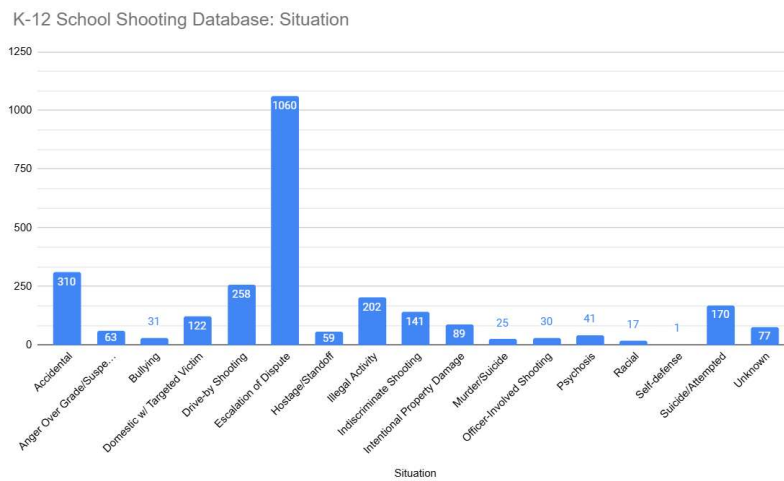
... There is no conclusive profile of a school shooter; however, there are some key risk factors such as elements of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), experiences of suffering from emotional distress because of personal life occurrences, bullying, exposure to violence, and weapon carrying

Motives for the shooting typically involved one or more grievances with classmates, their own families or school staff, a change in romantic relationship status, disciplinary action(s), or other personal issues including a desire to kill, suicide, and seeking fame or notoriety

⁵ O'Toole, Mary Ellen, "The School Shooter: A Threat Assessment Perspective," Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2000.

Shooters often had a history of school disciplinary actions (being suspended, expelled, or failing grades), and many had prior contact with law enforcement because of their behavior at school (GAO, 2020; NTAC, 2019). Half of the male school shooters had interests in violent topics, and for many, their social media accounts were often used as an outlet for self-expression and threats of violence (NTAC, 2019).⁶

The following graph⁷ quantifies these various circumstances leading to shootings:



Local officials have given examples where a student evidenced troubling behavior, e.g., drawing a picture showing a person with a gun and bodies on the ground. In such circumstances, they take action to address what is happening to this student. However, it is just as likely, if not more so, that a potential shooter goes undiscovered ahead of time. It is therefore critical that each school have personnel at the school, such as

⁶“School Shooters: Patterns of Adverse Childhood Experiences, Bullying, and Social Media,” *Journal of Pediatric Health Care*, Volume 36, Issue 4, P339-346 July-August 2022, [https://www.jpeds.org/article/S0891-5245\(21\)00290-X/fulltext](https://www.jpeds.org/article/S0891-5245(21)00290-X/fulltext), accessed April 23, 2026.

⁷ <https://k12ssdb.org/all-shootings>, accessed April 23, 2026.

counselors, psychologists, social workers, and other school employees who are attuned to potential shooter profiles and paths to violence.

The Santa Barbara County Education Office provides a template for comprehensive plans and holds an annual school safety seminar. Two Grand Jurors attended the 2025 seminar and found the information valuable. The seminar addressed the issue of identifying paths to violence and other measures that improve safety. Despite the valuable information disseminated in them, seminars are limited to 100-120 attendees, which is less than 5% of certificated staff (those requiring credentials) in all county schools.

Relations with local law enforcement

In the event of an active shooter on campus, it is critical that school officials and local law enforcement have easy communication and mutual trust. School administrators interviewed for this report all claimed they had good relations with local law officers. Relationships are built over years, leading to the administrator feeling comfortable calling on the officer on that school's beat for more serious law-related issues.

The Grand Jury inspected the files of one law enforcement agency that responded to two calls, several years apart, that suggested an active shooter on campus. In both cases, the call was a false alarm, but the reaction time from dispatch to school was approximately two minutes. And in both cases law enforcement was in communication with appropriate school officials.

Once a call is made to a campus, the first law enforcement officer on site directs action until a commander from the local jurisdiction (e.g., local police or county sheriff) takes over. All those interviewed, whether school personnel or law enforcement, were satisfied that this procedure was appropriate and adequate.

School Environments

Comprehensive School Safety Plans include physical elements to prevent intruder access to students or staff or to reduce damage from intruders. These include restricting access points to the campus, identifying and screening all visitors and

providing them with visible badges while on campus, instant electronic communication among staff and administration, cameras at key points on campus, locks from inside each classroom, evacuation routes, lock-down procedures, and security personnel. It is crucial that every administrator, teacher, staff member, and student know the emergency protocols and participate in drills to implement them. From interviews of certain school personnel, the Grand Jury is not convinced that the requisite knowledge is present in all employees.

An approach that assists the entire school community to deal with acute problems is called the Standard Response Protocol (SRP).⁸ It uses a common language that helps first responders to know what to expect at the school during an emergency situation. An example of an SRP graphic follows:



School safety includes practicing the drills that might be necessary. Even if schools cannot prevent or predict an active shooter event, training and drills can lessen potential tragic outcomes.

Some of these drills, however, could be traumatic to emotionally fragile or previously traumatized students. Accordingly, the State restricts high intensity drills that could be traumatizing.

The Grand Jury looked at several elementary, middle, junior high, and high schools throughout the County. In each school the Grand Jury addressed, there were some safety personnel or at least staff that served in that capacity.

⁸ The "[I Love U Guys](#)" Foundation is the creator, developer, and owner of the Standard Response Protocol (SRP), a school safety program used by many schools and organizations worldwide.

School Resource Officers

In the middle, junior high, and high schools, there were school personnel serving as safety officers, and in some there were School Resource Officers (SRO) or Deputies (SRD). SROs and SRDs are sworn police officers or sheriff's deputies whose time is purchased by the schools to be on campus fulltime. Although there has been controversy about SROs in the past, most principals the Grand Jury interviewed cited positive personal relationships of SROs or SRDs with students on campus, creating an atmosphere of trust. Other schools found that SROs were unnecessary but retained their own security personnel.

From the interviews the Grand Jury conducted with school officials and former SROs, often these officers establish trusted relationships or even mentorships with students. They also serve as impediments to those who would use violence on campus. And, as trained officers, they can direct school security officers in times of violence.

It is important for the officer to have the personality to become part of the school community. Some of them have even served as coaches. SROs are specifically trained in Education Code, Penal Code, and Health and Safety statutes as they relate to youth and students including de-escalation techniques, behavioral threat assessment, emergency operations planning, and armed assailant response. The SRO-specific training equips officers to develop successful relationships with diverse students and to support students with disabilities and behavioral health challenges. Other training topics include digital safety, human trafficking, mental health, and signs of substance abuse. This specific level of training is not required of local school security personnel.

Other schools and districts have chosen to hire their own safety personnel and forego SROs or SRDs for various reasons. These include budgetary constraints (as SROs appear to be significantly more expensive), SROs' possession of guns causing trauma to students, fear of racial discrimination, and perpetuation of a school-to-prison pipeline.

Studies on the topic differ on the benefits of SROs.⁹ While it appears the presence of SROs decrease violence on campus, they do not reduce lesser acts of aggression.

⁹ E.g., Sorensen, Avila-Acosta, Engberg & Bushway (University at Albany "The Thin Blue Line in Schools: New Evidence on School-Based Policing Across the U.S.", *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management* (Autumn 2023); Ben Fisher et al., "School-Based Law

Another objection is that their presence results in more arrests of students of color and leads to the school-to-prison pipeline.

None of these studies were specific to Santa Barbara County where districts vary on their approaches to SROs and SRDs. Advocates for SROs argue that the key is the personality of the officer. Some are very adept at making themselves a trusted and integral part of the school community.

SROs are more costly, however, than non-officer safety personnel. But advocates argue, in light of their relationship to the police department or sheriff's office, SROs bring a whole package of support with them. Nevertheless, those schools without SROs have reported that relations with local law enforcement have been good without an SRO.

The Grand Jury recognizes that hiring SROs is expensive and is concerned with the studies indicating the potential for discrimination against students of color. That is unacceptable, though the Grand Jury did not come across specific instances of such discrimination recently in the County. SROs have extensive training in education, law enforcement, and community relations, and many schools have found them to be valuable. Each school district should regularly evaluate its security personnel and strongly consider hiring at least one SRO per school or to be shared by two schools.

Wellness

School needs to be a safe space for students, a place where they can learn and thrive. Mental wellness and mental health are key building blocks of overall school safety. In Section 32282.1(a) of the Education Code, the California legislature encourages all comprehensive safety plans "... to the extent that resources are available, to include clear guidelines for the roles and responsibilities of mental health professionals, community intervention professionals, school counselors, school resource officers, and police officers on school campuses, if the school district uses these people."

Enforcement Strategies to Reduce Crime, Increase Perceptions of Safety, and Improve Learning Outcomes: A Systematic Review" — *Campbell Systematic Reviews* (December 2023); Jessica Welburn Paige & Shawn D. Bushway, "The Role and Impact of School Resource Officers: A Brief Discussion" — RAND Corporation (November 2024).

Guidelines should include "... strategies to create and maintain a positive school climate, promote school safety, and increase pupil achievement, and prioritize mental health and intervention services, restorative and transformative justice programs, and positive behavior interventions and support." EC Section 32282.1(b)(1).

Wellness centers on school campuses can help fight isolation, provide tools for students to improve their mental health responses, reduce stress, and increase resiliency. Wellness programs can help identify students who are loners, bullied, resentful, self-harming, and/or suicidal, encouraging them to heal and become productive members of society. Law enforcement profilers have identified these issues as areas to watch for in the effort to help prevent targeted violence. Safe, trusted adults that students can confide in not only create community but also help keep the school community safe.

Students can find trusted adults from a variety of roles on campus. They can be a counselor, teacher, coach, psychologist, social worker, administrator, security officer, or an SRO. These trusted adults can help educate students on conflict resolution when there is trouble between or among students.

Wellness also would include a healthy home life with positive parental supervision. For many reasons, many parents lack adequate parenting skills. During the past year, at least three students came to a school in the County with a gun, and other weapons have been found in student backpacks. The Grand Jury would remind schools and parents that California Criminal Code Section 25100 criminalizes the unsafe storage of a firearm when a child or prohibited person accesses it and causes death or great bodily injury. Schools might want to send annual notices to the parents of their students making them aware of these consequences.

CONCLUSION

It appears that each Santa Barbara County school district has developed its plans on time and, as far as the Grand Jury has been able to ascertain, conducts drills for its teachers, staff, and students on the plan. Nevertheless, the Grand Jury has some recommendations to improve each school's readiness for the unimaginable tragedy should it come to their school.

FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Finding 1: The Santa Barbara County Education Office (SBCEO) provides County school districts training in identifying pathways to targeted violence, although attendance by employees of the various Santa Barbara County school districts in the SBCEO's School Safety Symposium is limited.

Recommendation 1a: The Grand Jury recommends that the Santa Barbara County Education Office make its School Safety Symposium available online for ease of accessibility for school staffs county-wide.

Recommendation 1b: The Grand Jury recommends that all Santa Barbara County school districts require administrative leaders to attend the School Safety Symposium in person at least once every two years.

Recommendation 1c: The Grand Jury recommends that all Santa Barbara County school districts encourage teachers and staff to attend the School Safety Symposium in-person, and if not in-person, access the online seminar annually.

Finding 2: Santa Barbara County school districts are compliant in creating Comprehensive School Safety Plans for their schools, but some staff require more information and training on safety protocols.

Recommendation 2a: The Grand Jury recommends that the Santa Barbara County school districts train and drill all fulltime campus personnel and students for campus safety at least once per semester.

Recommendation 2b: The Grand Jury recommends that the Santa Barbara County school districts provide written and verbal instruction to all temporary personnel, including substitute teachers, prior to their entering a new classroom location.

Recommendation 2c: The Grand Jury recommends that the Santa Barbara County school districts provide quick reference situational cards and/or information posters conveying simple instructions for emergency response procedures in every classroom and in public rooms.

Finding 3: While many Santa Barbara County school districts have a watch, listen, and report culture for enhancement of threat detection in their schools, not all schools have anonymous pathways for reporting threats or potential threats online or on campus.

Recommendation 3a: The Grand Jury recommends that all Santa Barbara County school districts train school personnel on how to gain trust, understand healthy boundaries, and engage in strategic partnerships with community service groups to support student needs.

Recommendation 3b: The Grand Jury recommends that all Santa Barbara County school districts provide an anonymous reporting mechanism on school-provided devices, in addition to a drop box available on campus.

Finding 4: School Resource Officers or Deputies are valuable in preventing or addressing potentially dangerous situations on campus, but many schools do not employ them.

Recommendation 4: The Grand Jury recommends that all Santa Barbara County school districts have School Resource Officers (SRO) or Deputies (SRD).

Finding 5: Some schools in Santa Barbara County school districts lack adequate controls for visitor access.

Recommendation 5a: The Grand Jury recommends that Santa Barbara County school districts improve visitor access control during school hours by requiring valid government-issued photo identification verified by school personnel, utilizing a system that checks for restraining orders or other legal restrictions.

Recommendation 5b: The Grand Jury recommends that Santa Barbara County school districts require all schools to issue visitors a badge and require its visibility on the visitor while on campus during school hours.

Finding 6: Not all schools in Santa Barbara County have adequate safety infrastructure, including fences, cameras, classrooms that lock from the inside, restricted access points, and instantaneous communication devices.

Recommendation 6: The Grand Jury recommends that all Santa Barbara County school districts have each school conduct an annual security review with respect to video security cameras at key points across school grounds, two-way communications on campus, and innovations, such as artificial intelligence-aided technologies or drones, and make improvements based on those reviews.

REQUIREMENTS FOR RESPONSES

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To: REQUEST FOR RESPONSE

Pursuant to California Penal Code §933 and §933.05, the Grand Jury requests each entity or individual named below to respond to the findings and recommendations within the specified statutory time limit.

Responses to Findings shall be either:

- Agree
- Disagree with an explanation
- Disagree partially with an explanation

Responses to Recommendations shall be one of the following:

- Has been implemented, with a summary of the implementation actions taken
- Will be implemented, with an implementation schedule
- Requires further analysis, with an analysis completion date of fewer than 6 months after the issuance of the report
- It will not be implemented with an explanation of why

Santa Barbara County Superintendent of Schools: 60 days

Finding: 1

Recommendation: 1a

Santa Barbara County District School Boards: 90 days

Ballard School District Board

Blochman Union School District Board

Buellton Union School District Board

Carpinteria Unified School District Board

Cold Spring School District Board

College School District Board
Cuyama Joint Unified School District Board
Goleta Union School District Board
Guadalupe Union School District Board
Hope Elementary School District Board
Lompoc Unified School District Board
Los Olivos School District Board
Montecito Union School District Board
Orcutt Union School District Board
Santa Barbara Unified School District Board
Santa Maria-Bonita School District Board
Santa Maria Joint Union High School District Board
Santa Ynez Valley Union High School District Board
Solvang School District Board
Vista del Mar Union School District Board
Santa Barbara County Board of Education

Findings 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6

Recommendations 1b, 1c, 2a, 2b, 2c, 3a, 3b, 4, 5a, 5b, 6