

Anonymous reporting systems in schools can reduce violence, increase student connectedness

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Students are more likely to report warning signs of potentially threatening behavior if an anonymous reporting system is available to them, according to a new study led by researchers at the University of Michigan.

The study, conducted in collaboration with the Sandy Hook Promise Foundation and the first randomized control trial for these systems, examined the effectiveness of the Say Something Anonymous Reporting System in 19 [middle schools](#) throughout Miami-Dade County Public Schools.

The foundation launched SS-ARS after the 2012 mass shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Connecticut that resulted in 28 fatalities, and as the nation's only anonymous reporting system accompanied by tailored training for students, it has served more than 12 million students.

Researchers from the National Center for School Safety of the University of Michigan's Institute for Firearm Injury Prevention and the School of Public Health found that SS-ARS improved both cognitive and behavioral outcomes among sixth grade students, and reduced overall school violence, compared to schools that have not implemented the system. There were a total of 93 [school shootings](#) with casualties at public and private elementary and [secondary schools](#) in 2020–21—the highest number since 2000–01—according to a report released in June by the National Center for Education Statistics.

"We are encouraged by these findings, as the issue of school violence

continues to affect our country," said lead author Hsing-Fang Hsieh, research assistant professor at the Institute for Firearm Injury Prevention and the National Center for School Safety's evaluation director.

"The prevention-focused features of this program address the complex social and behavioral issues around reporting violence before it happens—an issue that is multifaceted and requires an evidence-based approach like SS-ARS to help reduce school violence."

The findings, published this week in the *Journal of School Violence*, also show that promoting and encouraging use of the system within the [school setting](#) improved self-efficacy and intention to report among more than 700 students who participated in the study.

Sixty-six percent of school shooters tell someone what they plan to do, according to 2019 [findings \(PDF\)](#) reported by the U.S. Secret Service, and 89% had displayed objectively concerning or prohibited behaviors that were observed by others. And among children and teens who commit suicide, 54% had communicated about, or engaged in behaviors related to, suicide or self-harm. In some cases, multiple friends knew that the attacker was suicidal.

"School [violence](#) is, unfortunately, a very significant issue in the United States, and too often students and staff look back after a violent event and wish they had spoken up or taken concerning comments or behaviors more seriously," said Justin Heinze, associate professor of health behavior and [health education](#) at the U-M School of Public Health and co-director for the National Center for School Safety.

"It may sound straightforward, but there are lots of reasons why people don't speak up. SS-ARS and programs like it provide both guidance for when to use it and a quick and easy way for students to share their concerns that someone may hurt themselves or others.

"Currently, there is very little research on the implementation and efficacy of anonymous reporting systems. U-M's partnership with Sandy Hook Promise is a great example of applying a scientific approach to a school-based intervention strategy that expands the research field and works to develop best practices for other schools seeking to emulate the foundation's model."

More information: Hsing-Fang Hsieh et al, The Effectiveness of the Say-Something Anonymous Reporting System in Preventing School Violence: A Cluster Randomized Control Trial in 19 Middle Schools, *Journal of School Violence* (2022). [DOI: 10.1080/15388220.2022.2105858](https://doi.org/10.1080/15388220.2022.2105858)

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