

# 'Aggressive drills' in response to US school shootings can harm students, expert says

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Credit: Unsplash/CC0 Public Domain

Six months after the mass murder of young students at Robb Elementary School in Uvalde, Texas, shootings at U.S. schools appear to have reached a five-year high, according to Education Week. The nonprofit

magazine reports that 34 people have been killed and 88 have been injured as a result of 40 shootings at schools this year.

But James Alan Fox, a Northeastern professor who maintains the longest-running and most extensive data source on [mass killings](#), says that many of those events do not meet the traditional criteria.

## **What constitutes a school shooting?**

Fox notes that people tend to define [school shootings](#) as tragic events that victimize students during classroom hours: At Virginia Tech, where 32 people (including 27 students) were killed in 2007; at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, where 26 people (including 20 first-grade students) were killed in 2012; at Robb Elementary School, where 21 people (including 19 students who were 10 years or younger) were killed.

Fox says that the tabulations of Education Week do not meet the traditional criteria because many of the events in 2022 took place at school rather than in school.

"Of the 10 fatal shootings, seven occurred in the [parking lots](#) and playgrounds and athletic fields outside the school," Fox says of the 2022 data. "It's an important point because when people think about school shootings, they respond by wanting more security in the school."

Fox says that inflating the threat of school shootings leads to policies that he argues can be harmful to students—such as arming teachers with guns and operating active shooter drills at schools that result in stress and anxiety that Fox cites as needless.

"The point is, you need to have a clear set of data in order to know what to do about it," Fox says.

Fox says his goal in managing the [Associated Press/U.S. TODAY/Northeastern University Mass Killings Database](#) (which won a 2022 EPPY Award for digital journalism) is to deepen perspective and reduce anxiety around such horrific incidents. He says the same is true of the context he provides on school shootings.

"We focus a lot on these shootings, which are awful," Fox says. "They absolutely impact the entire community when they happen. But they are extremely rare."

And yet, adds Fox, the events sometimes result in drastic measures within schools.

"Forty states require schools to conduct active-shooter drills," Fox says. "Some of the schools do these very aggressive drills involving fake blood and someone running around with a gun. I've heard of schools that have unannounced drills and they get on the public address system and announce, "This is not a drill.'"

Fox says these measures have a deep impact on students. He cites a 2020 social media study that linked active shooter drills in school to increases in [student](#) depression, stress and anxiety, as well as physiological health problems among students from 5 years old through high school age.

Instead of organizing live shooter drills, Fox recommends that administrators and teachers instruct students on how to respond in the rare case when a shooter invades their space at school.

"When you get on an airplane, they don't do a drill—they just tell you what to do in the case of a water landing," Fox says. "There are things we can do that will make kids safer without scaring them."

A general heightening of violent rhetoric has contributed to student

anxiety, says Jack McDevitt, a former Northeastern professor who has been studying hate crimes for 35 years.

"We're seeing more kids involved in hate crimes—and feeling justified—because of the rhetoric they see on websites and on social media," says McDevitt, who helped design the FBI's system for collecting data and then traveled to more than 60 U.S. cities, helping train police departments across the nation to recognize and deal with [hate crimes](#). "To think that the schools are immune to the messages all around us in society would be naive."

McDevitt says there needs to be a greater emphasis on identifying students who need help before they reach for a gun to respond violently. Salvador Ramos, the 19-year-old student responsible for the attack in Uvalde, was a loner who had been bullied.

"We don't want to demonize young people, because there are many, many more [warning signs](#) than there are school shooters," McDevitt says. "But it's also the case that in many school shootings, people did see signs that they didn't act on. We don't do a very good job of educating people about that.

"Now, there are some places where we do it really well: There are a lot more people willing to step up and say, "Don't drive the car tonight because you've had too much to drink, I'll give you a ride home,"" McDevitt adds. "But we don't see people doing that in a situation where somebody might be threatening violence at school."

Altogether, says McDevitt, there is a need for a focused approach to school shootings based on the data.

"Are we increasing the definition of what a school shooting is?" McDevitt asks.

Fox says his research found that an average of six students were killed annually in school shootings from 2010 through 2021. For perspective, he notes that 30 students die each year while commuting to and from schools.

Overall, the toll of shooting deaths (homicides, suicides and gun accidents) throughout the U.S. reached 45,222 in 2020. Fox notes that school shootings account for a very small percentage of the 3,500 children and teens who are killed in U.S. shootings annually.

"These are terrible events," Fox says of school shootings. "But it's important to combat the hysteria. Because when there is hype and hysteria, we tend to do things that are ill-advised."

Provided by Northeastern University

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