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## A Longitudinal Study of Violence Prevention by Georgia's Rural Public School Superintendents: Three Decades of Changes and Continuities

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## **Introduction**

Thirteen dead at Columbine High School, 32 dead at Virginia Tech University, and 26 dead at Sandy Hook Elementary. Mass shootings at school puncture our wider experience that schools are safe and violence at school, specifically mass murders, are quite rare events. But whether the body count is 1 or 31 the negative impact these events have upon our perception of school safety is undeniable. Research findings over three decades support the conclusion that students are safer at school than virtually any other place in their lives. Objective reality can be quickly forgotten when school shootings gain massive media coverage and feed the narrative that our world, our society, our schools are dangerous places and images of students running for their lives in panic flood the airwaves and our perceptions. Sociologists and criminologists understand that subjective reality is every bit as real and meaningful as objective facts. While crime and violence in society and schools has been tumbling downward for over thirty years, fear of crime continues to rise. These two facts are true and exist at the same time, in the same mental space where the public tries to make sense of a contradictory and at times bewildering society. Prompted by the idea that school superintendents, through their position of authority and power in school systems, are in a unique position to know what schools are doing to protect students from violence and maintain a safe and secure school environment, we focused our survey research on their perceptions. Our survey incorporated superintendents' thoughts during pre-testing of the instrument along with school safety measures found in the literature. Because of the salience of the topic, our survey work was longitudinal with data collected in 1996, 2006, and 2016. This research provides a rare opportunity to compare and contrast school violence prevention and safety techniques and strategies over time from the point of view of the person with the most responsibility for keeping schools safe. Both authors have interest in rural crime and consequently our focus was on Georgia's rural public school systems. In selecting our study population we found it important to understand the changing demographic landscape of rural Georgia and its schools. Georgia is the largest state in terms of land mass east of the Mississippi River and many of its 159 counties are rural in population and character. But even faster than the rest of the nation, Georgia is more and more urban and rural towns and villages are finding themselves to be "metro adjacent" as the urban population of Georgia climbs.

### **The Shrinking Rural Population**

The rural population of the USA continues its long historical decline. In 1990, 25% of the nation's population lived in rural areas, but by 2000 that percentage had declined to 20% and in 2010 it is down to 16% and falling. Today there are only four states, Vermont, West Virginia, Maine and Mississippi in which more people live in rural than urban areas (<https://priceonomics.com/the-most-urbanized-states-in-america/>). As the nation's rural population continues to shrink, rural school districts are also declining in number and enrollment (Kusmin 2016). The rural population in Georgia is declining faster than the nation while the population of the state grows precipitously. In 1990, 32% of the state's population was rural. By 2000 the rural population of Georgia had fallen to 28% and in 2016 it is 17% of the state's 10 million people.

In a 2013 report titled, "The Status of Rural Education" the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) notes that a little over half of all US school districts operate in rural areas, but only a quarter of the nation's students are in rural schools. In 2013, of 181 school districts in Georgia, 18.7% of students were in rural schools, while a third of Georgia's schools are classified as rural schools.

[https://ballotpedia.org/Public\\_education\\_in\\_Georgia](https://ballotpedia.org/Public_education_in_Georgia)

The shrinking rural population nationally and in Georgia has made it much more difficult for scholars and US Census officials to consistently define "rural" for demographic and other scholarly research purposes. In our survey in the 1995 we selected a rural school system definition from University of Georgia demographers which identified 114 public school systems in Georgia as rural (Bachtel and Boatwright 1995). We excluded several nonmetropolitan independent city school systems in order to maintain a definition of the study population that was conceptually consistent with the literature on rural schools. Changes in the last two decades of the US Census definition of rural and nonmetropolitan places led us in our 2005 study to adopt a definition of rural schools based on the "Four Georgia's" classification scheme developed by University of Georgia scientists (University of Georgia College of Family and Consumer Science, 2003). This produced a study population of 104 rural school systems.

The National Center for Education Statistics) revised its definitions of school locale types in 2006 after working with the Census Bureau to create a new locale classification system ([http://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator\\_tla.asp](http://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_tla.asp)). This urban-centric classification system has four major locale categories—city, suburban, town, and rural—each of which is divided into three subcategories. Cities and suburbs are subdivided into

the categories small, midsize, or large; towns and rural areas are subdivided by their proximity to an urbanized area into the categories fringe, distant, or remote. Unlike the previous classification system, which differentiated towns on the basis of population size, this system differentiates towns and rural areas on the basis of their proximity to larger urban centers. This key feature allows NCES to identify and differentiate rural schools and school districts in relatively remote areas from those that may be located just outside an urban center. The distribution of districts, schools, and students across locales highlights some key differences in the size and nature of education in rural America, compared with towns, suburbs, and cities. In 2010-11, more than half of all operating regular school districts were located in rural areas (57 percent), while 20 percent of districts were located in suburban areas, 18 percent in towns, and 5 percent in cities (National Center for Educational Statistics 2010). Predictably, in our most recent study in 2016, definition of the study population of rural schools had to change again to reflect redefinition of nonmetropolitan schools and the ever shrinking rural population of Georgia (National Center for Educational Statistics 2016). There are 81 school districts in Georgia which NCES codes identify as either Rural Distant or Rural Remote. For the purposes of our study, we eliminated the Rural Fringe coded school districts in order to sharpen our focus on safety in fully rural schools. Many "rural" schools identified as Rural Fringe, are in fact parts of metropolitan areas (metro adjacent) and did not fit our definition of the study population. These 81 rural schools formed our study population for the school safety survey administered in 2016. It was interesting to the researchers to observe the interplay between declining rural population over the three decades included in this study and the conceptualization and reconceptualization of "rural" and rural schools.

### **Changes in Society, Technology, and its Impact on Survey Methodology**

From the 1990's to the present the digital revolution has recast decades-old survey methodologies, regarding technology and response rates (Fowler Jr. 2013). Societal changes in how we communicate have forever changed survey research, and administration of our survey over three decades is testament to these changes. In our 1995 survey, we employed a strategy to survey rural school superintendents in Georgia that included a mix of face-to-face interviews, and telephone surveying (Ballard 1998). By 2000, the preferred survey method among superintendents was to return mailed hard copies via fax (Ballard and Brady 2007). The explosion of social media and personal communication devices made our survey

work in 2016 much more challenging, particularly concerning both study design and response rate concerns. Today, survey research design must consider factors such as multiple communication platforms and modalities which have arisen and are emergent. Software like Survey Monkey or Qualtrics provides greater online survey options in the digital era. Matters are further complicated by the ubiquity of marketing studies which offer options such as cash or gift incentives to consumers for completing surveys, a pattern which has already impacted academic research. In the three decades of the present research, it is a different world for researchers who once relied on the United States Postal Service, land line telephones, or door to door canvassing to reach respondents. As social media and digital communications unfold, conducting a survey today is no simple proposition. Imagine how complex it would be today to conduct a survey today using only cell phones only as your mode of observation. Internet sites, Twitter, Facebook, Snapchat and other social media are often included in contemporary survey design strategies (Keusch 2015).

Combine these data gathering technical concerns with the shift in public behavior that linked survey completion to rewards and the result is a tangible potential for declining response rates. Add to all of these factors postmodern realities such as loss of trust in institutions, disbelief in traditional authority, and dismissal of rationality and you have justifiable reasons for survey researchers to lose sleep. In our school safety studies, our response rates reflected shifting realities over the thirty year period: 1995 – 71%; 2005 – 58%; and 2016 – 41%. Results of our survey conducted in 1996 were published in an article in *Southern Rural Sociology*, Vol 14, pp. 91-109 and 2006 survey results in *Journal of School Violence*, Vol. 6, No. 4, pp. 105-129.

Regarding mass shootings at school, in 1996 there were slightly less than 3 million guns in the USA, and 5 million by 2006. But by the end of 2016 that number had spiked to over 11 million. The availability of guns has dramatically changed and with it an increase in mass shootings at schools. The FBI reports six mass shootings at school during the 2000-2005 period. The number of mass shootings at school climbed to an average of 16 per year in the 2006-2013 period. The FBI report cites availability of guns and copycat crimes as contributing to the rise in mass shootings at school. <http://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/number-mass-shootings-rise-most-schools-fbi-report-n211261>

## **Results: Three Decades of Comparisons and Contrasts**

### *Police on School Campuses and the Decline of the DARE Program*

For much of the 34 years that the Drug Abuse Resistance Education program (DARE) has been in existence, it has been the backbone of drug education/prevention work in public schools across the land. For a period of twenty years in the 1980's and 1990's it was considered to be a critically important cog in efforts to keep young people from initiating illegal drug use, but more significantly for the present research, it introduced more police officers onto school campuses. In fact, if you were an elementary or middle school student during those years "chances are good you were publicly offered drugs at school by a uniformed police officer" to test your resistance and reinforce classroom drug education (<https://priceconomics.com/dare-the-anti-drug-program-that-never-actually/>). Academic research into the true effect of the DARE program and its impact on youth drug use together with government accountability studies confirmed the disappointing finding that the DARE program had no measureable effect on whether kids used illegal drugs or not, and in a study or two there was even the suggestion that the DARE program had the opposite effect (Lilienfeld et al. 2014). But once a government program is implemented it can be hard to end, particularly when it was a rational response to have a greater police presence on school campuses to combat school violence which peaked in the early 1990's. The cool cop cars, gifts, the friendly and available police officers, the influx of financial resources into school budgets, and the partnership between the police, parents, and schools were not structures that would not be easily ended. Proponents argue that even if the program didn't succeed with its intended purpose, it had latent positive functions that were of value to schools and the community. During the three decade time frame of this longitudinal study, the DARE program rose, plateaued, and declined. Damning academic studies, government scrutiny, and media attention to the shortcomings of the DARE program had turned the tide against DARE. New drug education and resistance programs, some online, were introduced and represented options for schools that did not have the failure stigma which DARE had. Over a billion dollars had been spent over the three decades to fight "The War on Drugs" of which DARE was a highly visible symbol.

Matters were further complicated by the fact that there was widespread academic and public agreement that the war was being lost and law enforcement at all levels began seeking alternative platforms and other approaches to drug resistance, education, and treatment including the introduction of drug courts in communities and alternative sentencing

of drug offenders <http://www.usnews.com/news/blogs/at-the-edge/articles/2015-12-21/the-war-on-drugs-is-over-and-we-lost>.

**Table 1. Police Officers on School Property**

	<u>1995</u>	<u>2005</u>	<u>2016</u>
City or County Officers	85%	75%	77%
School Resource Officers	40%	70%	77%
DARE Program/Officers	83%	67%	32%

While declining from 85% in 1995 to 77% in 2016, the majority of superintendents still report using city or county law enforcement officers on school property for security, traffic control, student control or a combination of these functions. This slight decline in the use of city or county officers is likely related to the striking growth in the use of School Resource Officers on school grounds from 40% in 1995 to nearly 80% today. Headed the other direction, as Table 1 reflects, the presence of officers on school campuses associated with the DARE program is trending sharply downward, and in fact is down over 50 percentage points over the three decades covered in this study. It bears pointing out that several newer drug resistance and education programs stepped in to the void as DARE declined. It is unclear in 2017 whether the presence of law enforcement officers, as was associated with the DARE program is also a feature of newer programs like CHAMPS “Choosing Healthy Activities and Methods Promoting Safety”, which the Georgia Sheriff’s Association organized and promoted in 2003 to respond to the true effectiveness of the DARE program <http://georgiasheriffs.org/programs-services/champs>. It is reasonable to assume that levels of police officer presence under the CHAMPS program will approximate those of the DARE program given their sponsors.

### *Ubiquitous Surveillance*

Rural schools in Georgia are not yet at the point of blanket video surveillance like CCTV coverage in Europe, yet as fear of violence, terrorism, and incivility marches forward at a stiff pace, school superintendents here do have a host of anti-violence strategies and technologies, including video surveillance to protect students (Tilley 2016). Common areas of students’ school lives, such as the cafeteria, hallways, lockers and gymnasium, are routinely monitored. Now we would be shocked if schools were not keeping a big brotherly eye on student, teacher, staff, administrator, and visitor movements on school grounds

particularly at entrance and exit points. Over the three decades span of our study there have been changes in video and other security technologies which merit discussion. The ability to store digital images and sound in the 1990's had limits in a VHS era. The cost and technical capacity to monitor and store moving images and sound for multiple school sites was prohibitive for many rural school systems in Georgia. School buses, for example had camera systems in the 1990's but were quite low in storage capacity and difficult to fund and maintain in working order. Use of fake cameras (a decoy camera with a flashing red light but not actually connected to a data recording and storage system) on busses was common as a violence deterrent. Technologies such as digital video recorders and HDTV monitors with high volume data storage capacities have leap forward in the 2000's. However, they have done so with a substantial price tag, again limiting what rural schools in Georgia can afford to deploy to prevent violence. Security options continue to be a cost-benefit decision and in 2016 virtually all, but not all, school buses have video and audio recording capability. Repair and maintenance expenses of more sophisticated recording technologies mean tough budget choices in Georgia's rural public schools which have experienced two decades of budget cuts and school safety spending is no exception. Since 2003, Georgia's public schools have lost 8.3 billion in funding due to budget cuts according to the Georgia Budget and Policy Institute (2018). School superintendents are in the unenviable position of determining which critical priority, which Job 1, keeping students safe or insuring a quality education, gets funded first or cut back first. There are real and sizable political pressures surrounding both priorities and with slashed budgets, decisions have consequences.

**Table 2. Use of Video Cameras for Security Purposes (na = no data)**

<u>Location</u>	<u>1995</u>	<u>2005</u>	<u>2016</u>
School Buses	100%	97%	91%
Cafeteria	na	83%	94%
Entryways	na	85%	94%
Parking Lots	na	77%	88%
Athletic Venues	na	28%	82%

The trend line is moving toward greater use of cameras for surveillance and security changing from about 8 of 10 systems using cameras in common areas to 9 out of 10 today. The 100% figure in 1995 regarding use of surveillance cameras in school buses in 1995 is



misleading. Most school systems had cameras on buses, but in 1995 the use of fake cameras was common. As low as 39% of all school systems surveyed in 1995 had working cameras on *all* school buses. The 2005 and 2016 data are more valid with most systems today using “live” cameras on all school buses. There is a common problem of keeping cameras running on all buses with budget constraints being a prominent variable in decisions to repair and replace non-working cameras. As Table 2 indicates, in our 1995 survey we did not ask about cameras in locations other than school busses.

### *Digital Communications, Institutional and Personal Devices, and Social Media*

Our initial survey in 1995 didn't have a single measure related to social media...it just wasn't a factor then. But by 2016 every Georgia rural public school addresses cyberbullying and does what their resources permit to monitor online threats to student safety. With the world available at a click, we live in an era of ubiquitous social media and the job of preventing violence at school is a big and complex one, altogether too big for the rural school system perform alone. This is one reason for the increased police presence on school property. School superintendents are acutely aware today that it is possible, in fact likely, that a disaffected or agitated student may cause panic and school crisis in an instant. Further, no public school can be 100% protected from a lone wolf or home grown act of terror breaching even the most well thought out school safety plan. During the 1990's smart phones were no issue at all. At that time all superintendents we surveyed prohibited beepers which were widely regarded as illegal drug distribution communication devices. By the time of our second survey in 2005, not-terribly smart phones were in many students' hands and were defined primarily as a distraction to the learning environment. Most school superintendents we surveyed preferred to prohibit their use on school grounds, but balanced that with policies which permitted students to carry and use cell phones if they did not interfere with the education mission, or become a security matter. Some parents were insisting that student cell phones enhanced security. In cases across the nation where acts of violence occurred, cell phones were recast as security tools rather than security risks. Today's smart phones have the potential to greatly enhance student and school safety as a tool for emergency communication, but may also greatly threaten student and school safety by enabling threats or even the remote detonation of bombs. Phone use is a complicated matter for school safety policy and practice. The default position sides with permitting students to carry smart phones

on campus until the privilege is abused. You can see the risks with this policy are great. Indeed school systems across the land, including some in rural Georgia, have embraced and adopted digit education to the point of requiring a digital device of some type to engage in the classroom. Doubtless it is unrealistic to ban smart phones or other smart devices in today's schools. But placing students and the Internet together for educational purposes carries substantial security risks, and identity theft may be the least of these risks. The range of social media available to students at a click is mind numbing and superintendents who attempt to control access and monitor these communication devices are facing technology conundrums which were not dreamed of two decades ago. In the 2016 survey superintendents do not think social media is a huge security issue for their students, but they recognize that in a small number of cases it can have a profoundly negative impact on students and safety. They may be seeing just the tip of the iceberg. As noted in a recent Washington Post article, the list of schools that partner with police to monitor student social media activity is growing. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-switch/wp/2016/04/22/schools-are-helping-police-spy-on-kids-social-media-activity/?utm\\_term=.c1d602690e36](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-switch/wp/2016/04/22/schools-are-helping-police-spy-on-kids-social-media-activity/?utm_term=.c1d602690e36)

The security industry in our nation is gearing up to provide digital tools to schools that want to spy on student online activity as part of the movement to protect students from cyberbullying and harassment by frenemies. Where the market goes, schools may follow, especially if police officials tout these technology tools as central to protecting children at home and school and government sources make funding available.

**Table 3. Electronic Communications on Campus: Phones, Beepers, Walkie-Talkies**

	<u>1995</u>	<u>2005</u>	<u>2016</u>
Student Cell Phones Use	*	50%	94%
Beepers Prohibited	80%	83%	**
Staff Walkie-Talkies	98%	100%	100%
Staff Use of Cell Phones	*	71%	74%

We didn't ask about student cell phone use in our 1995 survey because such use was non-existent or negligible then. By 2016 the question is no longer "are cell phones permitted", but rather how unthinkable it is to attempt to prohibit students from bringing cell phones to school. Beepers, a symbol of illegal drug activity in 1995 were widely prohibited, a trend that continued in our 2005 survey. By 2016, student

use of beepers was so rare that it was omitted from the 2016 survey. There may be some readers, including the authors, who wondered whether use of staff walkie-talkies for security had been left behind in the march of new digital technology, but as shown in Table 3, walkie-talkies continue in 2016 to be a mainstay of communications for school safety purposes. Walkie-talkies perform a critical function in Georgia's rural schools where school bus drivers traverse miles and miles of isolated rural roads. Having a video camera on a bus is no substitute for rapid communication which walkie-talkies provide. Cell phones may eventually replace the safety and security functions of walkie-talkies, but for now, they continue to be a key communications technology for rural schools. In the 2016 survey we learned that faculty, staff, and administrative use of personal cell phones for safety and security communications is frequent, and a pertinent question is whether school systems supply cell phones or whether personal cell phones will predominate in how teachers and school administrators communicate about safety issues. Clearly a mix of personal and school-provided cell phones is in use in 2016.

### *Searches*

**Table 4. Searches**

	<u>1995</u>	<u>2005</u>	<u>2016</u>
Locker Searches	77%	78%	73%
Drug Dog Searches	73%	88%	89%

A large majority of school systems perform locker searches. The use of drug dogs was "an event" in the 1990's involving coordination with law enforcement agencies and was talked about as a special event. Today use of drug dogs in schools is routine with nearly 9 out of 10 school systems having easy access to drug dogs.

**Table 5. Weapon Detection**

	<u>1995</u>	<u>2005</u>	<u>2016</u>
Fixed Doorway Metal Detectors	20%	10%	23%
Hand Held Metal Detectors	64%	56%	43%

Across three decades, superintendents have said they used hand held metal detectors as needed. Federal funding for hand held detectors has evaporated over the past decade a factor in the downward pattern. Doorway detectors remain part of security strategy in a minority of rural

school systems. Superintendents say doorway detectors are not warranted and not widely used.

### *Weapons at School*

The number of guns, knives, or other weapons confiscated from students on school grounds is very small for most rural Georgia public schools, less than five per year. This pattern has remained constant over the three decades. There are isolated incidents reported in our research where a student is shot or knifed on school grounds. Superintendents in schools we studied remove on average one gun per year. Removing knives that students bring on school grounds does not occur often with four or five per year being the modal response. Over the three decades, superintendents are less likely to report today that students carry knives to school or have access to guns as part of rural culture in Georgia. Explosive devices and arson are even rarer on school grounds. As noted earlier, common fistfights and bullying are more frequent occurrences.

### *Dress Codes*

Enforcement of dress codes is a standard feature of how schools attempt to control student conduct but there have been changes over the three decades. Visible tattoos and piercings which were commonly prohibited in the 1990's seem to be a less of a concern in 2016. Symbols of the Confederacy have grown less acceptable over the three decades with half of the school systems banning them in 2005 and 70% doing so in 2016.

### *Alternative Schools*

Use of alternative schools to control disruptive student behavior and to bring order to unruly classrooms has been common (85%) over the three decades. In the 1990's it was typical for several rural school systems to join together to share the expense of staffing and operating an alternative school. A new pattern regarding alternative schools emerged in the past decade. As many as half of the superintendents we surveyed say they now use alternative schools as sites for alternative learning styles to be practiced. An educational mission focused on meeting learning objectives for all students has been incorporated into the social control function these schools have performed.

### Other School Safety Items

**Table 6. More Comparisons over Time**

	<u>1995</u>	<u>2005</u>	<u>2016</u>
• New School Policies about School Violence	46%	20%	30%
• Book Bags Permitted	93%	88%	97%
• Student Assaults on Teachers	8%	20%	26%
• Police Called to Campus for Student Violence	79%	29%	43%

Formal school safety plans were not mandated in 1995, but by 2016 all rural public schools in Georgia were required to implement a safety plan. Additional policies addressing school violence prevention reflect responses to specific threats or, in a small number of cases, litigation over specific incidences. For a while in the 1990's it appeared that only transparent book bags would be permitted, especially in elementary grades, but over the three decades the common practice is to permit all manner of book bags which does represent a risk for school safety. The reporting of assaults on students and other personnel on school grounds is mandated, so the percentages reported here suggest a mixed pattern over the three decades with an upward trend line. Regarding police being called to campus to deal with student violence, the decline we show is misleading because the establishment of larger numbers of school resource officers on school grounds has had an impact. Why call police to campus when there are already police on campus?

### School Safety Concerns: Growing, Lessening, Staying the Same?

To close the survey we asked school superintendents whether they think school safety concerns are growing, staying the same, or lessening.

**Table 7. Are School Safety Concerns Growing, Lessening or Staying the Same?**

	<u>1995</u>	<u>2005</u>	<u>2016</u>
Growing	48%	12%	18%
<b>Staying the Same</b>	<b>47%</b>	<b>85%</b>	<b>71%</b>
Lessening	5%	3%	11%

The main take away point is that school superintendents tend to see school safety concerns “staying the same”. This is a quite positive finding reflecting the fact that their schools are generally safe and secure and they are not having to respond to an uptick in school violence. Georgia’s rural schools report relatively small amounts of crime on school property and for most students, safety and security are being maintained. Actual violence at school is uncommon but fear of violence at school remains a constant concern.

### **Findings and Discussion**

Three decades of data, reflecting quite similar measures of school safety over time, provide a rare look at the status of violence prevention in Georgia’s rural public schools. Variation in superintendent responses over the three data points was, on the whole, minimal, making t-Test of Means unnecessary in the analysis of data. The stability of school safety measures over time suggests that the level of school crime and violence has been low and remains low. Still, there is a constant risk of violence that school superintendents attempt to manage daily. Our results describe the success Georgia’s rural school superintendents are having in keeping students safe and secure. Smaller schools may indeed be safer schools as confirmed in the literature on school safety (Nathan and Thao 2007, Mitchell 2000). Our longitudinal study chronicles changes in violence prevention technologies, shifts in school safety strategies, and calls into question beliefs that rural public schools are merely smaller urban schools. Further we found that structural factors such as public school budget cutbacks specifically affect decisions superintendents make about the educational mission and also the safety mission. The axiom that order must be established before learning takes place highlights the dilemma budget cuts present. With a host of federal and state mandates about how curriculum and instruction must be funded, no room is left for superintendents to shift funds to violence prevention for fear of harming learning. Fortunately, increased use of personnel such as school resource officers and the movement to greater police presence in schools have come with an added funding stream. Future research should address whether metro adjacent schools display higher rates of school crime and violence than more isolated rural schools. Greater research attention should also explore comparisons between violence prevention technologies and strategies in urban and rural school. Another research theme should address differences in school safety between public and private schools and between tradition public schools and newer charter schools. Technology changes faster than people do (Ogburn 1922), so

who can tell what technological changes will be seen in the next decade and how school safety strategies will evolve beyond the age of lone wolf and homegrown terror threats?

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