



BY CHIEF DEAN ESSERMAN (RET.) POLICE FOUNDATION SENIOR COUNSELOR

Every single school shooting is a tragedy steeped in pain and loss.

But for every school attack, there are many more that are prevented. Typically, attacks are averted because someone warned law enforcement or school officials. That can be a potential shooter's family member, a friend, classmate, staff at school or just someone who saw enough of something to say something. We know this has happened because we have been tracking averted attacks for almost two years. We also believe there are many attacks that have been prevented that we don't know about. Yet.

That's why we are seeking help from law enforcement, school administrators, teachers, parents and mental health professionals across the United States.

Thanks to funding from the Department of Justice, Office of Community Oriented Policing and the National Institute of Justice, we began the process of creating the Averted School Violence Project three years ago. Initially, we worked closely with subject-matter experts to develop an online data collection platform where information regarding averted attacks can be submitted and reviewed to identify lessons learned.

We are compiling an extensive learning library from all of this information. It's akin to studies of other averted tragedies in professions such as the airline industry, medicine, fire and EMS. Of course, another example is the ongoing Police Foundation's LEO Near Miss Project that studies law enforcement "close calls."

The Averted School Violence platform adds to the body of knowledge by creating a system that supports continued learning and the sharing of ideas and stories from the various professionals that make up the school community throughout the nation.

Police Foundation staff and subject-matter experts have preliminarily reviewed 51 incidents of averted school violence gleaned from public source materials.

These are some of the lessons learned thus far:

- Schools and law enforcement must build trust and open lines of communication. This must happen prior to any potential school violence — relationships must be pre-established to truly work.
- Students need to remain cognizant of their surroundings and report any threats that they hear. Every potential danger must be taken seriously by the students AND the officials they speak with (Already, we have determined more than half of the instances of averted violence were stopped by a student sounding the alert).
- Students should be trained to recognize not only threats of violence but instances of depression or suicidal signs.

- Parents should remain vigilant and monitor their children’s social media accounts, along with their general use of the internet.
- Parents should keep all guns in locked and secure locations.
- School personnel and SROs must look for students who are bullied, depressed, or feel excluded or challenged so they can get them help.
- Schools should create a safety team to address all concerns.
- Schools must be vigilant at all entrances to their facility while having sufficient staff to observe everyone entering the campus.

Being able to study instances of averted school violence will create an environment where law enforcement, school administrators, teachers, counselors, and other professionals can learn from one another and equip everyone with the necessary information to prevent further tragedies.

Looking at the similarities and differences between averted and completed incidents can create an ongoing learning process that enables our researchers to continuously identify trends and allows practitioners using the ASV database to continuously view lessons learned from their counterparts nationwide.

As we saw in Parkland, Fla., every school shooting remains a fluid, chaotic event. Parkland demonstrates the urgency of the Police Foundation’s ASV platform, particularly the need for those involved in averted attacks to both share their lessons learned and review lessons learned from others who have successfully prevented attacks. Armed with this knowledge, effective solutions can be implemented nationwide to help prevent future violence.

The bottom line is, we must take steps to prevent horrific acts of school violence from happening in the first place. In this regard, the Averted School Violence database offers promising solutions toward strengthening school policies and identifying “next” practices to prevent future tragedies.

Please consider sharing information about attacks that have been averted at your school or in your jurisdiction at www.asvnearmiss.org, or provide this essay to others that can share this critical data.

By submitting a report through the ASV system, you are providing other practitioners with the valuable insight and lessons learned that may help them prevent an attack at their school. We encourage you to provide information on averted incidents, but to also view reports from others in the ASV Report Library.

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If you have any questions, you can contact Sarah Solano at ssolano@policefoundation.org or (202) 833-1469.

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