

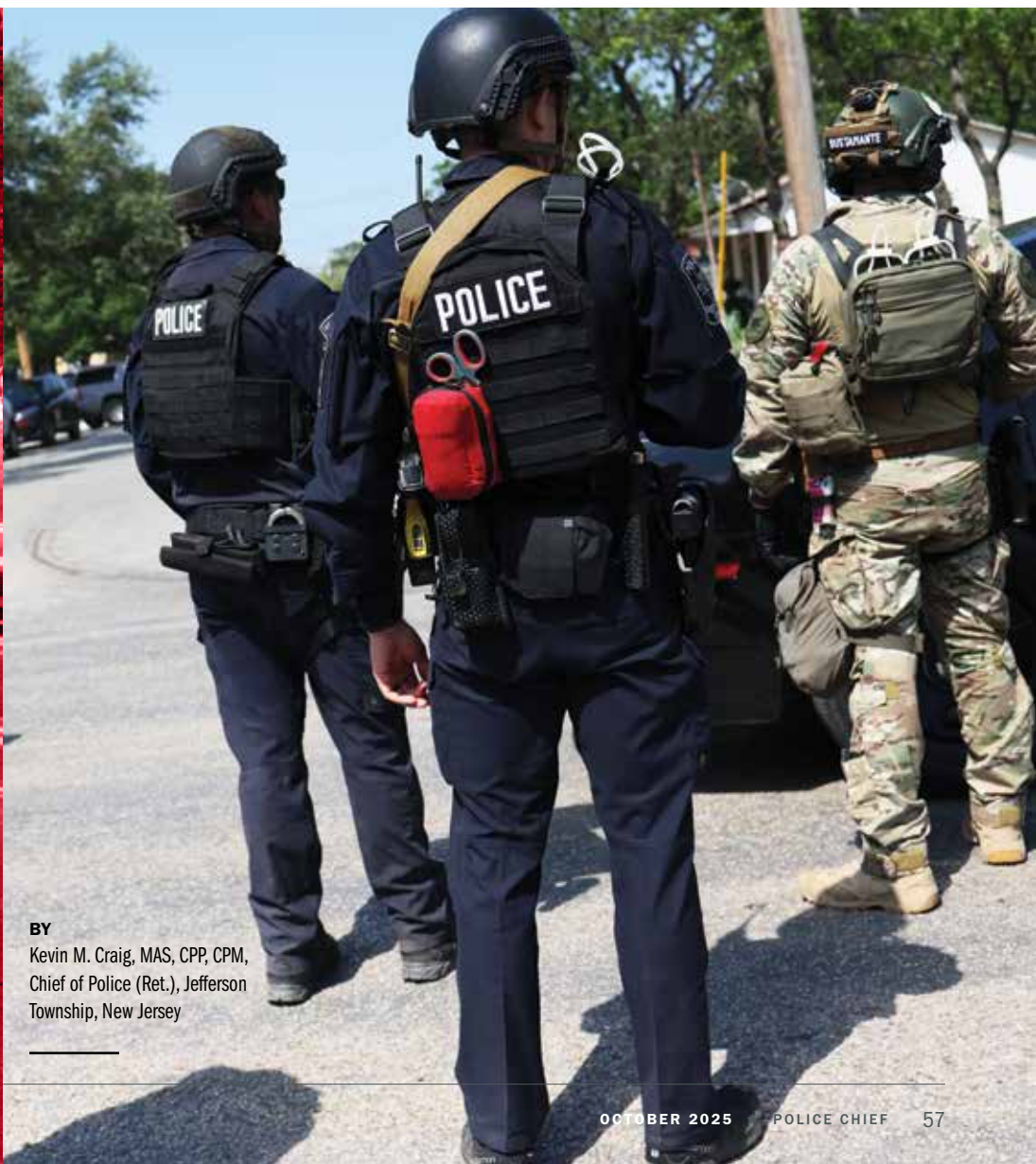
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SAFETY MANDATE

The Evolution of Police
and School Partnerships



BY
Kevin M. Craig, MAS, CPP, CPM,
Chief of Police (Ret.), Jefferson
Township, New Jersey

THE COLUMBINE HIGH SCHOOL SHOOTING IN LITTLETON, COLORADO, IN 1999, REMAINS AMONG THE MOST NOTORIOUS SCHOOL SHOOTINGS IN THE UNITED STATES. WHILE THE TRAGEDY HOLDS AN UNFORTUNATE MYSTIQUE,

sometimes leading would-be school shooters to idolize the perpetrators and use them as inspiration for their own acts of targeted violence, Columbine was not the first and certainly not the last event of its kind. Acts of targeted violence at schools have increased significantly after Columbine, particularly from 2010 to 2025. Much like Columbine, after each tragic incident, after-action reports indicate vulnerabilities that serve as a catalyst to enhance security measures at schools around the United States. This identification of vulnerabilities has led to target hardening and infrastructure enhancements that drive a multibillion-dollar industry of security-related products. For the policing community, these incidents have fundamentally changed how police engage with schools to prevent, respond to, and recover from acts of targeted violence in schools and other school-related emergencies.

In the immediate aftermath of Columbine and the incidents that followed, such as the shootings at Red Lake Senior High School in Minnesota (2005) and Virginia Tech (2007), school shootings were often viewed as a phenomenon involving high schools and institutions of higher education. In the early 2000s, enhanced security measures and police presence in the form of school-based policing initiatives and school resource officers (SROs) were focused on secondary schools primarily.

Then, the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting in Newtown, Connecticut, in 2012 forever changed the face of school violence including the evolution of police response. What was once an issue related to teenagers and young adults became a question of how to protect an even more vulnerable population—elementary school children.

In the years that followed, school shootings continued to occur with increased frequency in colleges and high schools like Marysville Pilchuck, Washington; Umpqua Community College, Oregon; Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida; Santa Fe, Texas; Oxford, Michigan; University of Las Vegas, Nevada; and Apalachee High School, Georgia, but also in elementary schools like those in Townville, South Carolina; San Bernardino, California; and Uvalde, Texas.

Not only has targeted violence in schools transcended grade levels, it has impacted both public and nonpublic schools, including faith-based schools, charter schools, and private schools, further impacting how police engage with schools within their jurisdiction.

CHANGES IN POLICE RESPONSE

Police responses to a variety of incidents continuously evolve with new technology, equipment, and training. Responses to school emergencies have seen significant evolution in recent years. A major driver of changes in response protocols are after-action reports from incidents of school violence and active shooter events. By looking critically at tragic events in an effort to improve response times and minimize casualties, the policing community has increased training for active shooter events at schools, particularly addressing how and when officers enter schools and attempt to engage perpetrators.

Police practices are far removed from the Columbine days of securing perimeters and waiting for highly specialized tactical teams to make entry into schools to confront assailants. The post-Columbine response protocols evolved to include police assembling contact teams made up of several officers trained to move together tactically and swiftly toward the sound of gunfire or suspected location of an assailant to neutralize the threat. Even with these improvements in response, an FBI study of active shooter incidents between 2000 and 2013 indicated

that 60 percent of the active shooter incidents studied ended prior to police arrival through intervention by others or suicide.

As active shooter incidents in schools continued to occur with seemingly increased frequency with growing casualties, task forces convened to study past incidents and responses in an effort to find ways to enhance responses to these incidents. The police response to active shooter events further evolved from small contact teams to solo officer response. The solo officer response requires even a single officer arriving at the scene of an active shooter event where there is evidence that the perpetrator is actively seeking victims to enter a building to confront an assailant. The solo officer response creates additional risk for the responding officers and requires additional training to be done effectively.

The shift from tactical teams to single officer response is not the only consideration for police response to school emergencies. Another significant issue was the need for faster communication to the police to reduce response times. Coupled with single officer response protocols, this would theoretically result in quicker engagement of assailants by police and reduced casualties. The desire for prompt notification of police resulted in many schools utilizing a variety of emergency notification systems and panic alarms to alert police with the push of a button or tap on a cellphone application. These systems vary significantly in complexity, capability, and cost, and there is little standardization in implementation. Despite these irregularities, the panic alarm concept has garnered significant attention across the United States, and as of May 2025, 11 states had passed laws to require the installation of silent panic alarms that are directly linked to the police. Fifteen additional states have introduced legislation to this effect, and U.S. federal legislation has also been introduced. The panic alarm laws enacted have been named Alyssa's Law in remembrance of Alyssa Alhadeff, a 14-year-old girl who was killed at Marjory Stoneman Douglas



High School on Valentine's Day 2018. The vast support of Alyssa's Law exemplifies the importance and value placed upon police response to school emergencies and the expectations of the public that schools maintain close communication with police partners.

SCHOOL-BASED POLICING

While active shooter events have led to changes in response and efforts to enhance notifications to police, how police engage with their school partners has also evolved. School and police partnerships have existed for decades in various forms. From the initial crime prevention school policing models of the late 1950s and 60s to the emergence of SROs, Drug Abuse Resistance Education (D.A.R.E.), and Gang Resistance Education and Training (G.R.E.A.T.) programs of the 1980s and 90s, police and schools have continued to work together as community partners. Like other

aspects of these relationships, implementation varies from state to state and even school to school within each state. How police are deployed in schools and what their specific roles and responsibilities entail vary a great deal. In some cases, police are assigned to schools in a protective or security function or as a periodic presence to deter criminal activity. In other cases, larger school districts form their own school police departments that fulfill all of the traditional functions of a police agency on school grounds. Ideally, school-based policing is implemented in accordance with the SRO model where officers' roles include crime prevention and safety educator, emergency manager, law enforcement problem-solver, and informal counselor. How police are deployed and what specific roles they play may significantly impact the relationship between the school and police and police and the community they serve. In recent years,

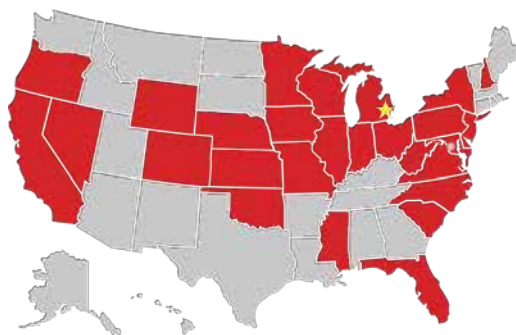
school-based policing programs have been criticized for creating a "school-to-prison pipeline" where youth are pushed out of school and into the juvenile justice or criminal justice system for offenses that might otherwise be handled by school officials if not for the presence of police in the school. Research indicates that the school-to-prison pipeline disproportionately impacts students of color and those with disabilities. This has led many communities to rethink the relationship between schools and police, adversely impacting school-police partnerships.

In an effort to provide guidance to support schools' efforts to implement school-based policing programs, particularly under the SRO model, in 2024, the U.S. Department of Justice – Office of Community Oriented Police Services published *Guiding Principles for School Resource Officer Programs*. These principles address local decision-making,

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“Police practices are far removed from the Columbine days of securing perimeters and waiting for highly specialized tactical teams to make entry into schools to confront assailants.”

memoranda of understanding, school discipline, judicious use of police powers, specialized hiring, tailored performance evaluation and supervision, development of transparent data and tracking systems, specialized training, student and family engagement, prevention of sexual assault and misconduct, annual program assessments, duty assignments, and communities of practice and professional support. The guiding principles are intended to improve school safety and security and avoid any potential harmful effects arising from the presence and roles of SROs.

In short, not all school-based policing programs are equally valuable or effective. In some cases, if not carefully implemented, school-based policing programs can result in unintended consequences that adversely affect the relationships that these programs are designed to foster. Careful consideration of these guiding principles is vital to success.

BEHAVIORAL THREAT ASSESSMENT AND SCHOOL VIOLENCE PREVENTION

While the police role in response to school emergencies is critical and continues to evolve, a new role has steadily emerged. That role involves prevention of school violence through behavioral threat assessment. While the concept of threat assessment has been considered since the School Safety Initiative of the U.S. Secret Service and U.S. Department of Education in 2004, the discussion has been revitalized by more recent studies and reports from the U.S. Secret Service National Threat Assessment Center. These more recent reports reinforce the

original findings of the School Safety Initiative and once again advocate for the implementation of behavioral threat assessment teams in schools. The revised guidance recommends a standardized process for receiving and assessing threats to determine if an individual may be on a pathway to violence and if intervention can be made to prevent it. Among the core tenets of this guidance is the establishment of a multidisciplinary team to assess threats. According to the guidance, threat assessment teams should include teachers, counselors, coaches, school administrators, and SROs. Police often have knowledge of students' lives and activities outside of school that may be valuable to the threat assessment process when coupled with the combined perspectives of the school-centered multidisciplinary team. In the vast majority of incidents of targeted violence in the school setting, warning signs or red flags were present that potentially could have prevented tragedies if promptly recognized and acted upon. The implementation of behavioral threat assessment teams in schools creates a structure and process to facilitate this identification and action and presents a unique opportunity for police to work with school partners to prevent or avert potential school violence. Much like Alyssa's Law for police notifications, a number of states have mandated behavioral threat assessment teams in schools, shifting focus from response to prevention and expanding the police role in this area.

COLLABORATIVE EMERGENCY PLANNING

Due to the significant impact and widespread media coverage of school

shootings, active shooter events garner significant attention on school-police relationships. Much in the same vein as the police role expanding from response to prevention in the active shooter context, the police role has continued to expand to other areas of school safety as well. While schools must prepare for the potential of an active shooter on campus, there are many other threats and hazards that they also need to prepare for. Threats can be caused by humans, such as violent events or threats; technology, as in cyberattacks; or nature, as in the case of a tornado, hurricane, or flood. For this reason, schools are looking to their police partners for guidance in planning for a wide array of potential threats, and police are increasingly working with schools to develop and coordinate all-hazards emergency plans. This process requires significant collaboration involving both internal and external stakeholders; identifying threats and hazards; determining objectives; and developing, implementing, and maintaining the emergency operations plan (EOP). In the *Guide to Developing High Quality School Emergency Operations Plans* issued by the Readiness and Emergency Management for Schools Technical Assistance Center, the involvement of police and other first responders is clearly vital to the process. The guide states that these responders' "expertise will inform the development, implementation, and refinement of the school EOP." Police, in their partnerships with schools, help prepare for all phases and all hazards before, during, and after an emergency.

OVERCOMING CHALLENGES

The expanded roles of police in the school environment do not come without challenges. With each new responsibility comes the need for additional resources, training, and expertise beyond what traditional policing requires. While this is the case in many aspects of today's policing landscape, it is clearly evident in the relationship between police and the schools in their communities. As the policing community continues to raise the bar through certification,

licensing, and accreditation, it is important to provide the necessary resources, training, and expertise to effectively fulfill the ever-expanding responsibilities of school-police partnerships.

THE PATH FORWARD

As communities continue to look for ways to provide a safe learning environment for their children, the role of police in schools will undoubtedly continue to evolve. The keys to success in the path forward are communication and collaboration, clear roles and responsibilities, and careful selection and training for police in schools. Collaborative partnerships between schools and police present a great opportunity to foster a positive and trusting relationship between police and the communities they serve. ♡

IACP RESOURCES

- IACP Prevention and Response to School Violence

theIACP.org

- Rethinking School Policing
 - The ABCs of School Security
- policechiefmagazine.org



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