

# SCHOOL SAFETY: RESEARCH ON GATHERING TIPS AND ADDRESSING THREATS

BY MARY POULIN CARLTON

A new area of research suggests that schools should have a systematic and coordinated approach in place to gather and process information on threats, respond appropriately, and document the response.



A warning that someone is planning a school shooting can save lives if it is received and acted upon in a timely manner. Research has shown that individuals who plan to conduct a school attack typically share that information with someone else. These are often peers, such as friends or other students at school.<sup>1</sup> Schools that use planned, systematic techniques for gathering information on threats may be well-positioned to receive tips on planned attacks and respond appropriately.

This notion that a warning can save lives is arguably the central premise for developing school safety tip lines and likely one of the key drivers behind a surge in new tip lines within the past few years. By the end of the 2018-2019 school year, about half (51%) of public middle and high schools in the United States had a tip line.<sup>2</sup> Most schools (about 60%) reported having tip lines for three years or less.<sup>3</sup>

Tip lines — designed in many different ways — offer one mechanism for gathering information on a threat to student or school safety. Tip lines collect information via phone, text message, app, email, or a website; they may involve live interaction, or information may be retrieved following submission. They often, but not always, offer anonymity or confidentiality to the submitter. School administrators, law enforcement, or others may operate tip lines at the state or local level.

Schools may also obtain information through more traditional sources, such as student discussions with trusted teachers or social media monitoring. But what is the most effective way to gather information on threats?

From 2014 to 2017, the National Institute of Justice (NIJ) funded several studies through its Comprehensive School Safety Initiative<sup>4</sup> that address a wide range of questions about identifying and reporting threats, and school response strategies. Many studies are ongoing, but the research is starting to indicate that although tip lines may be useful violence prevention tools, not all of them are likely to be equally successful. Tip lines should be coupled with efforts to facilitate an informed and coordinated response to the tip. In addition, the research shows that approaches to collecting tips — through a tip line or other method — should be accompanied by investments in technology, training, and engagement, as well as reliance on expertise by a variety of individuals and a systematic approach to responding to tips.

### Gathering Information

Colorado is generally credited with starting the first school safety tip line, Safe2Tell. Following the 1999 Columbine High School shooting, a review found that students and others had knowledge of the shooters' intent, but that the school's culture kept students from reporting their plans.<sup>5</sup> The Safe2Tell tip line — which guarantees anonymity to users — was created to help break this code of silence among students. There are also training and education components to Safe2Tell that may help increase knowledge of and trust in the tip line.<sup>6</sup>

This raises a critical point: It is not enough to build the technological infrastructure for a tip line. Planning and implementing tip lines should also include engagement with stakeholders, training, and awareness campaigns to ensure buy-in and use.<sup>7</sup> Previous research demonstrates that tip lines without an engagement component are underused.<sup>8</sup>

Lack of awareness is a key reason for underutilization, but there are other reasons as well. With or without a tip line, students may choose not to report a threat because they are concerned about what will be done with the information they provide (e.g., no response by the school, perception that the threat is not serious, or fear of retaliation against the reporting student) or because of a school culture that encourages a student code of silence.<sup>9</sup> In addition, certain features of a tip line — for example, accepting only phone calls — may limit usage.<sup>10</sup> Although research evidence is limited, making tip lines anonymous may help break the student code of silence and encourage students to use the tip line.<sup>11</sup> Ensuring that sufficient resources are available, including well-trained individuals who receive the information and respond to tips, is important as well.<sup>12</sup>

Tip lines can help identify school safety problems beyond the potential for serious physical violence. Preliminary evidence indicates that reports of bullying, self-harm, and suicide threats are among the most common types of tips received.<sup>13</sup> Even if schools do not intend to collect information on these concerns, they should be ready to respond to reports of these issues.

Early data also suggest that schools should be prepared to receive a large volume of tips. In its first 22 months of operation, a statewide school tip line in Oregon received 2,578 tips. Of these, 898 were related to bullying or harassment, 250 were tips on suicides others were planning, and 139 were tips related to threats of a planned school attack.<sup>14</sup> One Pennsylvania tip line received more than 23,000 tips in its first six months.<sup>15</sup>

In addition to tip lines, schools can encourage students to report school violence threats in other ways. As part of a larger NIJ-funded study on threat assessment by the University of Virginia,<sup>16</sup> researchers tested an online training program that aims to educate students about threat assessment and increase their willingness to report threats to school authorities.<sup>17</sup> The program emphasizes that students can report threats by talking to a school administrator. Results

from this study indicate that the training program increased students' knowledge of how to report threats of violence and their willingness to do so.

### After a Tip Is Received

Receiving a tip is just the first step in preventing a violent act or other negative outcome. A tip line should be coupled with a systematic approach to processing the information received, responding appropriately, and documenting the response. Unfortunately, many tip lines do not have formal written guidance on how to process tips. A 2019 national survey of tip lines found that only 35% had a formal, written policy in place for how to respond to tips.<sup>18</sup>

This is a concern for a few key reasons. First, it leaves room for the possibility that there will be no response to the tip or that there will be multiple, conflicting, or uncoordinated responses from different individuals. It may also result in an inappropriate response (e.g., overreaction or underreaction). Further, tip lines are likely to receive information on various types of threats, tips may or may not represent imminent concerns, and tip lines can expect to receive some false tips. Having a formal strategy and guidance in place — along with a team of individuals from various backgrounds, including educators, law enforcement, and mental health professionals — may allow schools to appropriately respond to tips and assess threats.<sup>19</sup>

Using a systematic approach to assess a student's threat to cause harm, such as behavioral threat assessment, can help determine the seriousness of the threat and inform an appropriate response.<sup>20</sup> In a school setting, behavioral threat assessment generally refers to a methodical approach to evaluating the likelihood that a student will carry out a violent act given an explicit threat or behavior indicative of a threat. There is evidence that at least one threat assessment approach, the Comprehensive School Threat Assessment Guidelines, can resolve threats without violence and lead to other positive outcomes for the school and the student making the threat.<sup>21</sup> Research on the effectiveness of other approaches is ongoing.

A recently completed study at the University of Virginia<sup>22</sup> examined whether threat assessment could prevent school violence and reduce the use of school suspension. The NIJ-funded study demonstrated a number of positive findings. For example, school threat assessment teams were able to resolve threats with few violent incidents. In addition, students making threats were most often referred for mental health services, less than half were suspended, and few were expelled from school. Threat assessment outcomes did not vary for students by race or ethnicity.<sup>23</sup>

Although useful, threat assessment can also prove challenging.<sup>24</sup> Schools must substantiate information and be prepared to respond to a dynamic environment in which new information will likely change the response. In addition, behavioral threat assessment will not be sufficient for assessing all tips. School safety threats posed by nonstudents or other types of tips (e.g., interpersonal conflicts, alcohol abuse, or theft) will require different responses. As the number of tip lines increases, better information will be available about the types of tips schools may receive, which can help inform appropriate responses.

### Additional NIJ Research on Tips and Threats

Given the nascency of approaches to gathering tips and responding to threats, there are many outstanding questions about their effectiveness. From 2014 to 2017, NIJ funded several studies via the Comprehensive School Safety Initiative to try to fill the gaps in our knowledge and provide information that schools and other stakeholders can use when developing or refining their own approaches. Many of these studies are ongoing.

For example, we are learning a great deal about the prevalence and characteristics of tip lines across the United States from the NIJ-funded study "Assessment of National and State Tip Line Technology as a Strategy for Identifying Threats to School Safety."<sup>25</sup> We have shared a number of findings from this ongoing study (conducted by RTI) throughout this article.

Several studies are examining approaches to collecting tips. For instance, researchers at the University of Michigan are evaluating the Say Something Anonymous Reporting System (SS-ARS) in Miami, Florida. SS-ARS is a Sandy Hook Promise Foundation program that allows both youth and adults to submit anonymous safety concerns online or by phone; a crisis center then reviews and shares the tip so that schools or law enforcement agencies can respond to prevent a negative outcome. The NIJ-funded study is examining whether SS-ARS improves the recognition of antecedents to violent and risky behavior and decreases the conduct of such behavior.<sup>26</sup>

A statewide experiment in Nevada is focused on whether the dual approaches of SafeVoice — an anonymous tip line coupled with multidisciplinary response teams — help improve school climate, address problem behavior in students, and result in appropriate responses by school staff and law enforcement. In addition, the NIJ-supported experiment is exploring how tip line implementation influences outcomes.<sup>27</sup>

ADVOCATR is a cellphone app that students can use to share confidential information on issues that negatively affect their safety, as well as positive issues that make them feel safe. A study of this app is being conducted as part of a larger evaluation of the Student Ownership, Accountability, and Responsibility for School Safety (SOARS) program. SOARS involves trainings and interventions designed to increase students' resilience to victimization.<sup>28</sup> This NIJ-funded study will help us understand the impact of a tip line in combination with other approaches to improving school safety.

NIJ has funded additional studies to help inform the development and use of other approaches to identify and respond to school violence threats. For example, Chicago Public Schools and researchers at the University of Chicago Crime Lab studied the use of social media monitoring to identify online behavior that suggests pending violence by students and then intervene quickly.<sup>29</sup> The results of the study,<sup>30</sup>

as well as concerns arising from the implications of monitoring students' posts on social media,<sup>31</sup> suggest that more research on social media monitoring to prevent school violence is worthy of future consideration.

In Colorado, NIJ-supported researchers are exploring the impact of the Safe Communities Safe Schools approach, which incorporates an information-gathering system (including, but not limited to, the Safe2Tell tip line), a multitiered system of support for students, and multidisciplinary school team and community partners. Early findings offer evidence of how schools can implement comprehensive school safety approaches; when the project concludes, information on the approach's overall effectiveness will be available.<sup>32</sup> The results of this and other studies examining comprehensive approaches will be particularly valuable given available evidence that singular strategies to address school safety are insufficient for tackling the range of safety challenges facing schools.

### Outstanding Questions

The field is starting to learn how to collect tips and how to respond to school violence threats. Research indicates that to be successful, these approaches require technological investments, training, trust building, and expertise by individuals across a variety of topics — as well as a systematic approach to assessing threats and responding to tips.

However, a number of critical questions remain. We need to improve our knowledge on the most effective — and, perhaps, least costly — approaches for learning about, assessing, and responding to threats. We must identify how to best incorporate these approaches with comprehensive strategies on school safety. In addition, we must learn how to implement strategies in a context where resources are strained and information is dynamic, limited, or shared across a variety of individuals or systems. Further, systems typically track incidents rather than students. This limits our knowledge on, for example, how helpful these strategies are for students who pose ongoing behavioral risks.

Finally, we do not have a strong understanding about which characteristics of the existing strategies for collecting tips and responding to threats are the most important in preventing undesirable outcomes, including school shootings and other violent acts. As school administrators and other stakeholders discuss what policies and practices to adopt so they can gather tips and respond to school safety threats, they should consider the research but also be prepared to make adjustments as knowledge grows and circumstances change.

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## About the Author

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## For More Information

Watch recorded sessions from the NIJ Virtual Conference on School Safety at <https://nij.ojp.gov/events/nij-virtual-conference-school-safety>.

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This article discusses the following awards:

- "Student Threat Assessment as a Safe and Supportive Prevention Strategy," award number 2014-CK-BX-0004
- "Evaluating the Effectiveness of the Say Something Anonymous Reporting System To Improve School Safety," award number 2017-CK-BX-0002
- "Research on the Effects of an Anonymous Tip Line and Multidisciplinary Response Teams in Schools Across the State of Nevada," award number 2016-CK-BX-0007
- "Project SOARS (Student Ownership, Accountability, and Responsibility for School Safety)," award number 2015-MU-MU-K003
- "Chicago Public Schools's Connect and Redirect to Respect (CRR) Program To Use Social Media Monitoring To Identify and Connect Youth to Behavioral Interventions," award number 2014-CK-BX-0002
- "Assessment of National and State Tip Line Technology as a Strategy for Identifying Threats to School Safety," award number 2017-CK-BX-0004

- "A Roadmap to Evidence-Based School Safety: Safe Communities Safe Schools," award number 2015-CK-BX-K002
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## Notes

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