

NEWS > CU NEWS

CU Boulder center knows how to prevent violence, but it's not simple

While many want a 'silver bullet,' researchers say it would take much more



An elderly couple hold hands at a makeshift memorial for shooting victims at the Cielo Vista Mall Walmart in El Paso, Texas, on Aug. 6.

Metal detectors. Bulletproof backpacks. School resource officers.

These are technical solutions given to an adaptive challenge: gun violence.

But adaptive challenges need adaptive solutions, not technical fixes, according to William Woodward, director of training at the Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence at the University of Colorado Boulder.

The center has created a model to improve school safety using adaptive leadership and solutions, and it has analyzed programs to discover what would work to reduce violence overall, which would also reduce gun violence. If those kinds of programs were put in place, violence would decrease by 20% to 30%, according to Beverly Kingston, director of the center.

Still, the violence continues. Just this past weekend, at least 22 people were shot to death Saturday at a Walmart in El Paso, Texas and nine people were shot to death Sunday in a nightclub district of Dayton, Ohio. There have been 253 mass shootings this year, [according to the Gun Violence Archive](#), an online archive that collects data on gun violence.

Researchers need to bridge the gap between the research itself and putting it into practice to start making progress, Kingston said.

The answer to the problem doesn't rely on a "silver bullet," she said. While better mental health services, gun control and things like metal detectors could be part of the solution, larger cultural and climate changes need to happen to effectively address violence, she said.

Leadership failures

Woodward trains schools on how to use the center's model, Safe Communities Safe Schools, to change their climates to prevent and reduce violence.

This model is being used in 44 schools across the state as part of a study on its effectiveness. The study will end in the next school year, and so far the data shows it improves schools' motivation and capacity to address safety issues,

The model uses data and research-backed programs to change school climates. The staff on the safety team individually answer a questionnaire to find gaps in peoples' knowledge. The students take a climate survey so school leaders can see what the real issues are, including bullying, substance abuse and mental health. Using the information, schools can implement programs that address those issues and are proven to work.

The center wrote the [Colorado Safety Guide for the Attorney General's Office](#) and found out of 2,000 school programs, about 80 were proved to be effective.

Some of the programs include LifeSkills Training, Olweus Bullying Prevention and Sources of Strength for Suicide Prevention.

The center's model also uses a threat assessment test from Dewey Cornell, which has been validated by the federal government's National Registry of Evidence-based Programs and Practices. After the threat is evaluated as either transient, meaning an empty threat like a teenager saying he's going to get someone back for winning a game, or substantive, meaning a threat that should be addressed, the school can decide to use one of three management options for the student.

The assessment was used on 7,400 students, Woodward said, and found only 1% were expelled and arrested, suspensions decreased, racial disparities decreased and counseling was utilized more, among other things.

The three types of shooters are considered to be: traumatized people, who score high on the adverse childhood experiences test and account for about 40% of shooters; psychotic people, who suffer from delusions or paranoid schizophrenia and account for about 30% of shooters; and psychopathic people, who can manage their impressions to hide their true nature and feelings and account for the last 30% of shooters.

Each type requires different management or treatment. Those who are traumatized may need therapy or extra supports; those who are psychotic probably need medication; and those who are psychopathic can only be managed externally, through monitoring, check-ins and limiting of movements throughout the school.

When children or people are showing red flags for any of these types, it's up to leadership to act to prevent the issues from worsening, Woodward said. In Parkland, Florida, for example, the sheriff's office had received dozens of calls for service related to the boy who would eventually kill 17 students at Marjory

‘A comprehensive approach’

The two sides of the political spectrum often call for increased gun control or blame these events on a person’s mental health issues.

But focusing on these two factors alone won’t solve the crisis, Kingston said.

“We focus on taking a comprehensive approach to safety,” she said. “Gun control and mental health would be components.”

Research supports ensuring there are systems in place to prevent people from getting weapons for criminal reasons, she said, but there is not yet enough research to confidently say which systems are best. And while mental health is important, it is better to take a broader view of the issue. Supporting people’s mental health before they get to a point of crisis would be more effective in stymieing violence, she said.

What the center does know is what programs and strategies can reduce the motivation for violence, which could help more than any one thing alone, Kingston said.

“There’s a lot of focus on the gun itself rather than, why would someone want a gun?” she said.

While some gun control legislation needs to happen, Woodward said it’s a technical part of the solution and not enough to stop the violence.

Woodward also said it’s a “non-sequitur” to say that mental illness makes people hurt others, because studies show mental illness does not cause criminality. Generalized mental health treatment also wouldn’t treat those who suffer from psychosis or psychopathy.

“It’s (expletive) to think that mental illness is causing this,” he said.

‘The world that we most want to see’

Kingston said there are proven ways to prevent violence or decrease motivation for violence, but there’s a desire from the public to have one easy solution.

In reality, it would take funding, cultural shifts and a willingness to do complicated things.
