

Questions for the Record from Senator Charles E. Grassley
Hearing on “After the Highland Park Attack: Protecting Our Communities from Mass Shootings”
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1. What role does behavioral threat assessment have in organizations other than schools?
Can behavioral threat assessment programs be used by other organizations like churches, social and civic organizations, businesses and similar groups?

Answer: They can be and have been but as with small faith-based, charter, boarding and independent schools, smaller organizations of these types often lack some or all the specialized personnel to conduct proper assessments. This is where regional teams of mental health and law enforcement personnel might be a cost-effective approach to support a wide variety of organizations via a grant program.

In my school district, we used federal grants to fund two full-time student intervention teams with a school district police officer and a school social worker working out of an unmarked police car with great success starting in the mid-1990s. Other districts have since also had success with this approach. It is my understanding that the national police in Israel have also teamed police officers and mental health personnel together, but I am not sure if this has been focused on threat assessment or more for responding to calls related to individuals with mental health conditions so the mental health workers are protected in the event of an individual who is in the relatively rare category of dangerously mentally ill people – most people with mental illness do not pose a threat to others but it has been my experience can be difficult to determine this when a call for assistance is received.

2. What role do School Resource Officers play in preventing and responding to acts of violence in our schools?

Answer: Having served as a Deputy Chief and a Chief of a School District Police Department for more than 30 years and having helped assess police departments and School Resource Officer

(SRO) programs for more than 100 school districts and non-public schools over the past three decades, my experience has been that:

- a. Carefully screened, properly (and specifically trained) and effectively tasked and supervised law enforcement officers can be highly effective in preventing and responding to acts of violence in K12 schools. I have personally been involved in cases where my officers and our school social workers have successfully averted multiple planned school shootings, one planned attack on a school bus and one planned middle school bombing over the years. School districts I have worked with around the nation have also successfully averted other planned attacks. It is also important to note that properly run SRO programs have also helped reduce truancy, the dropout rate, help reduce the number of arrests of school-aged youth through various intervention programs and educational programs such as law-related education.
- b. While people often focus on the relatively rare but catastrophic active shooter events, it has been my experience and CDC data supports my experience that most homicides in the K12 school setting are related to interpersonal disputes (45%) or gang activity (25%). In the experience we have gained conducting school safety, security, climate, culture and emergency preparedness assessments for more than 8,500 K12 schools, the number of fights and the level of gang activity are probably the most accurate predictors for school homicides overall. I note that this is not necessarily the case for the active shooter incidents that the public is most familiar with which though horrible and catastrophic, appear to account for about 8% of the people murdered on U.S. K12 school campuses. SROs and school district police officers working closely with school administrators, school mental health officials, parents, caregivers and students have proven to be a valuable component in reducing fights on school campuses and reducing the types of unlawful gang activities that lead to homicides at school.
- c. While most people assume that school shootings are the leading cause of death on U.S. K12 school campuses, there are other types of fatalities that SROs and school district police officers (SDPOs) have helped to prevent. For example, the

data we have developed indicates that more students, staff and visitors are killed in school parking lots and drives in motor vehicle accidents (typically involving pedestrians – usually students – who are hit by school buses and parent’s vehicles). Another example are the lives that have been saved by SROs and SDPOs during medical emergencies such as sudden cardiac arrest, loss of blood and drug overdoses.

- d. Having just completed a massive three-year national-level evaluation project to develop strategies to prevent and intervene in student e-cigarette use in K12 schools with severe vaping problems, we have found that SDPOs and SROs have been heavily engaged in helping school officials combat this truly destructive public health epidemic as declared by the United States Surgeon General.
- e. I caution that like many other valuable and effective school safety approaches, the quality of SRO and SDPO programs is extremely important. In my opinion, school-based law enforcement officers should be compensated to a level at least comparable to local law enforcement personnel to attract and retain top-flight officers who are suited for this special type of assignment. I also recommend that officers in this type of assignment need more training than patrol officers as there are many important areas where this is critical ranging from use of force training, de-escalation techniques, understanding students with special needs, mental health training, child abuse investigations, substance abuse issues and officers should be familiar with the variety of intervention approaches such as social emotional learning, trauma informed practices etc. used in the schools where they are assigned.
- f. I also caution that as with any viable and effective school violence prevention approach, SROs and SDPOs should never be viewed as the main, primary and especially as the only approach used to prevent school violence or to respond to it. The budget, staffing and deployment of SROs and SDPOs should be viewed in context with other important life-safety personnel such as school mental health professionals and school nurses. I think it is important for the Committee to understand that many public and non-public schools are severely under-resourced in personnel dedicated to these three critical life-safety roles.

3. Recent testimony before the Committee from Max Schachter, a school safety advocate and father of a child murdered in Parkland, referenced a University of Virginia study of Virginia schools which employed behavioral threat assessment. The study found no statistical difference between the rates of suspensions, school transfers, or legal actions between students of different ethnicities. Further studies have shown lower overall rates of suspensions in schools which incorporate behavioral threat assessment programs. Based on your experience, do you believe behavioral threat assessment programs can be implemented in schools throughout the United States to the benefit of those students regardless of race, gender, religion, disability, or other factors?

Answer: I am very familiar with the University of Virginia study and the superb work of Dr. Dewy Cornell. I note that this series of peer-review studies (I believe three of them have now been conducted) has documented that his model for student threat assessment and management does not have disparate impact on students of different ethnicities. While I have not seen convincing evidence of disparate impact on other nationally recognized models, this study is focused on the University of Virginia Model.

I should also note that the Dr. Cornell also assisted with an excellent study of how students in Virginia K12 schools viewed SROs, and they found that though there were some differences in results based on the ethnicity of student survey respondents, Virginia students of all ethnicities overwhelmingly supported having SROs assigned to their schools. I should point out that Dr. Cornell has been one of the more vocal critics of the misapplication of police officers in schools for more than two decades and is highly respected as providing very neutral and objective expert opinions based on meticulous research.

One thing our non-profit school safety center suggests to school districts we assist around the nation, is to survey students, parents and school employees about their SRO or SDPOs programs using questions with a Likert scale as well as open-ended questions. This is in keeping with leading quality service practices in various sectors and can provide much more accurate data on how the school community views SROs or SDPOs. If there are serious problems with one or more officers, it has been my experience that these will come to light through these types of surveys.

I hope this is helpful to you in your important work. Please consider me and the more than 60 dedicated analysts of Safe Havens International to be at your service if we can be of any assistance.