

# KidsRights Report 2018



## Not a Battleground

School Shootings and the Right  
to a Safe and Protective Environment

Authors: Ms. Kim Brouwers and Ms. Chrissie van Heijningen



KidsRights Foundation

Noorderakerweg 90  
1069 LW Amsterdam, The Netherlands

Tel: +31 20 225 8 225

[info@kidsrights.org](mailto:info@kidsrights.org) 

[www.kidsrights.org](http://www.kidsrights.org) 

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## Executive summary

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) lays down the right to a protective environment for every child. However, violence remains a daily reality for many children, at home, playing outside, or even at school.

School must be a safe haven for children, and too often it is not. Children around the world are exposed to all kinds of violence at school, from bullying and peer violence, to attacks from armed militia. In 2016, the Global Coalition to Protect Education Under Attack recorded almost 500 attacks and threatened attacks on schools in areas affected by armed conflict.

Children living in conflict zones are not the only ones with reason to feel unsafe at school. School shootings have become disturbingly commonplace even in communities far from war.

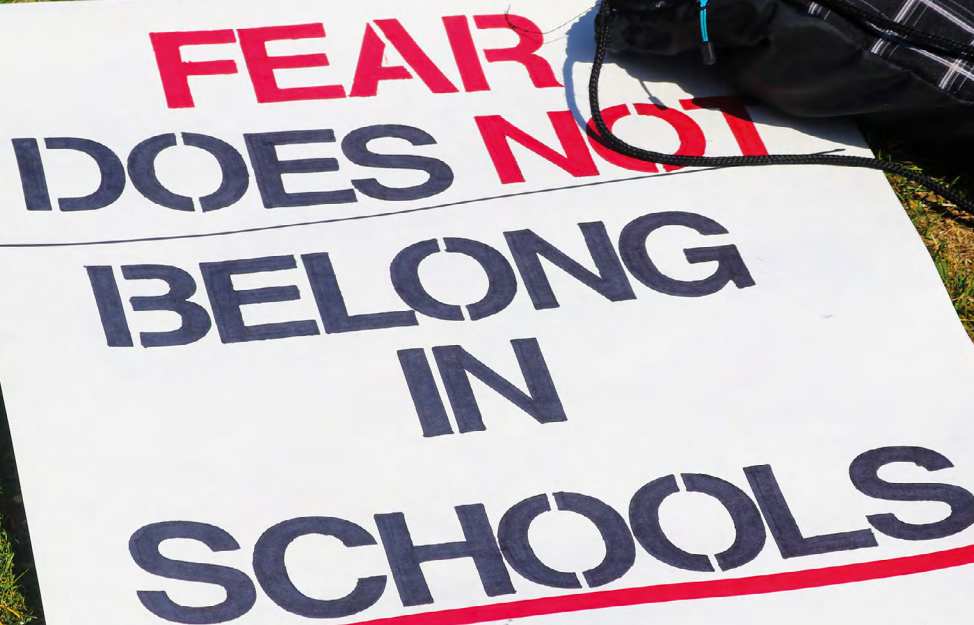
According to the UNICEF report, *A Familiar Face, Violence in the lives of children and adolescents*, 59 school shootings took place in 14 countries over the 25 years to December 2016. These shootings had to involve at least one fatality and more than two victims to meet UNICEF's definition. But with no universal definition in use, and the failure of many national governments to collect data on gun violence, the number is in fact likely to be higher.

In May 2018, CNN found the number of mass shootings on school grounds in the USA to be 57 times that of all the other G7 countries (Canada, Japan, Germany, Italy, France and the UK) combined.

As with the rest of the world, inadequate data collection makes it difficult to assess the exact number of school shootings on US soil. Are incidents truly on the rise? What are the causes and what can be done to prevent them? What little academic research there is on the subject remains inconclusive and out of date.

Without a sound understanding of the circumstances under which school shootings take place, it is difficult to make evidence-based decisions about how to prevent them. Instead, public debate rages about gun control and mental health without the data to make sense of it all.

We therefore call for data collection at national level, as well as research and funding to develop interventions to prevent violence in schools. We want the world to listen to children and young people, to respect their right to safety and to identify the way back to peace in schools.



**FEAR  
DOES NOT  
BELONG  
IN  
SCHOOLS**

# 1. Introduction

Violence is a daily reality for many children, whether at home, playing outside, or going to school. Some children have no place at all where they can feel safe.

More than 100,000 children die every year as a result of violence<sup>1</sup>, and others experience lifelong repercussions of violence suffered in childhood, including physical injuries<sup>2</sup>, mental health issues<sup>3,4</sup> and deteriorating academic performance.<sup>5</sup>

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) lays down the right to a protective environment for every child. The USA is the only country in the world that has not ratified this treaty, which sets out the human rights of every person under the age of 18.

It is the responsibility of countries, through government, communities, and agencies, to create

protective environments for children, by adapting their behavior and putting in place laws and regulations that protect children, and by establishing services to support children's safety and wellbeing.

Schools have a special place among these protective environments. School is where children learn and make friends, and where dedicated teachers provide a welcoming space. School should be a safe haven, but all too often, children around the world are exposed to violence at school, from bullying and peer violence, to attacks by armed militia.

Whatever the motivation, and whoever the perpetrators, violent attacks at school completely undermine its purpose. No child can learn or make friends in an environment where they feel unsafe.

## Article 19 – The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child: Protection from all forms of violence

1. States Parties shall take all appropriate legislative, administrative, social and educational measures to protect the child from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse, while in the care of parent(s), legal guardian(s) or any other person who has the care of the child.
2. Such protective measures should, as appropriate, include effective procedures for the establishment of social programs to provide necessary support for the child and for those who have the care of the child, as well as for other forms of prevention and for identification, reporting, referral, investigation, treatment and follow-up of instances of child maltreatment described heretofore, and, as appropriate, for judicial involvement.

## 2. When even schools aren't safe anymore



*“School is a place where you are supposed to learn new things and to make friends. But how are children supposed to learn new things when they do not feel safe? Well, what do you learn when you do not feel safe?”*

Mohamad Al Jounde (16, Syria), Winner of the International Children's Peace Prize 2017

School is often the place where children can escape the violence in their streets, or in their own homes. But not when bullying, sexual harassment, discrimination and corporal punishment take place. According to UNICEF, about half of the world's teens experience peer violence in and around school<sup>6</sup>, diminishing their capacity to learn and socialize, with the potential to cause long-lasting emotional damage.

### 2.1 Schools being used in conflicts

Schools are seen as a battleground by armed forces in conflicts around the world. Students and teachers are killed, injured, abducted and traumatized, affecting not just the victims themselves but others who fear it might happen in their school.

In 2016, the Global Coalition to Protect Education Under Attack recorded almost 500 attacks, or threats of attacks, on schools in areas affected by armed conflict. Between 2013 and 2017, thousands of students and teachers were killed or injured during attacks on schools and universities.<sup>7</sup> In 2014, Taliban gunmen killed 145 students in a school in Peshawar, Pakistan. In the same year, a group of Boko Haram fighters abducted 275 girls from a government-run high school for girls in Chibok, Nigeria. Fifty-seven of the girls were able to escape, but more than 200 girls remained captive for years. In 2017, six students and one security guard were killed by gunmen, including a former pupil, in a mass shooting at the Lokichogio Mixed Secondary School in Kenya.

*Ahmed, the 14-year-old student, remembered being in the school's auditorium when four or five people burst in through a back door "and started rapidly firing." After getting shot in his left shoulder, the ninth-grader lay under a bench.<sup>8</sup>*

These are just a few examples of horror for students and teachers. Those who survived the attacks are unlikely ever to feel completely safe in a classroom again.

### 2.2 School shootings

On February 14, 2018, the initiators of March For Our Lives, winners of the International Children's Peace Prize 2018, experienced a mass school shooting at their high school – Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida. Fourteen children and three adults were killed, and seventeen were injured.

Determined that no child should ever again experience what they had, the students founded March For Our Lives to demand peaceful solutions for safer schools and communities.

It's not just children living in conflict zones who have reason to feel unsafe at school. According to the UNICEF report, *A Familiar Face, Violence in the lives of children and adolescents*, 59 school shootings took place in 14 countries over the 25 years to December 2016.<sup>9</sup> These shootings had to involve at least one fatality and more than two victims to meet UNICEF's definition. But there is no widely agreed definition in use, and some databases list school shootings generically as public shootings.<sup>10 11 12</sup> Many national governments fail to collect detailed statistics on gun violence, and the actual number of school shootings worldwide is therefore likely to be much higher than the data suggests.

After the school shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High, one of the deadliest in history, CNN studied media reports and databases including the *Gun Violence Archive and Northwestern Institute on Complex Systems*, to

## When even schools aren't safe anymore

break down the number of school shootings around the world. They only included incidents taking place on school grounds (kindergarten through college/university), where at least one person was shot other than the shooter, from January 2009 to May 2018.<sup>13</sup>

**Number of school shootings around the world, select countries, between January 1, 2009 and May 21, 2018.**

Country	Shooting incidents
United States	288
Mexico	8
South Africa	6
India	5
Pakistan	4
Nigeria	4
Afghanistan	3
France	2
Canada	2
Brazil	2
Greece	1
China	1
Kenya	1
Azerbaijan	1
Germany	1
Russia	1
Estonia	1
Turkey	1
Hungary	1
Spain	1
Australia	None identified
Switzerland	None identified
Italy	None identified
Japan	None identified
Netherlands	None identified
Argentina	None identified
United Kingdom	None identified

CNN's research shows a huge gap between the USA and other countries around the world when it comes to school shootings. From 2009 to the time of the study, there were 288 school shootings in the United States. That number is a staggering 57 times that of all the other G7 countries (Canada, Japan, Germany, Italy, France and the UK) combined.

David Hogg, a student at Marjory Stoneman Douglas, hid for three hours with fellow students in a small back room during the shooting, trying not to scream so the shooter would not find them. He later wrote:

The worst part about hiding, for me at least, was when we started getting texts. *"Oh my God, what's that noise?"*, one read, *"It is like somebody's shooting."* And the next one read: *"someone's running down our hall with a gun, shooting. I love you guys so much!"* And then another person wrote: *"someone's shooting into my class, there's smoke in the air, it's so thick."* Then came videos of people dying on the floor, people bleeding out, and nobody knew who they were because it was blurry and their hair was covering their faces.<sup>14</sup>



### 3. School shootings in the USA



*“For people who felt unsafe everywhere else, school is now an unsafe place as well.”*

Jaclyn Corin (17, United States), co-initiator of March For Our Lives, winner of the International Children’s Peace Prize 2018.

The shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, on February 14, 2018, was the 18<sup>th</sup> US school shooting to take place in 2018 – an average of one every 60 hours.<sup>15</sup> Many American children no longer feel safe at school. 6.7% of US students said they missed at least one day of school in the past month because they were afraid, either at school or on their way to or from school.<sup>16</sup>

Metal detectors and active shooter drills have become topics of debate on school boards and are already a daily routine for many young Americans. Fear has taken root in schools, and children can feel it, missing out on school activities and classes due to safety concerns.<sup>17</sup>

#### 3.1 School shootings – on the rise?

The high number of active shootings at US school facilities has been called an ‘epidemic’ and an ‘American phenomenon’.<sup>18</sup> Others argue that the number of victims of school shootings has not grown, and that the media is simply placing more emphasis on school shootings than before.<sup>19</sup>

One study of active shooter incidents in the USA between 2000 and 2013, carried out by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), shows that of the 160 identified incidents in that timeframe, 39 (24.4%) took place in educational settings.<sup>20</sup> Educational environments were identified as the second-largest locus of active shootings.

In a historical examination of intentional mass school shootings in the USA, Katsiyannis and Whitford show that the number of such events is indeed on the rise. Their research demonstrates that more people have died or been injured in mass school shootings in the United States in the past 18 years than in the entire 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>21</sup> This view is supported by Lee, who found a rise in school shootings in the USA between the 1980s and 2000s.<sup>22</sup> However, scholars such as Fox claim that research shows that school shootings are not more common nowadays and that schools are ‘safer than ever’.<sup>23</sup>

Despite the dramatic impact on the lives of children, not much academic research has been conducted on school shootings. That which does exist is out of date and inconclusive, as can be seen in the above disagreements on whether or not school shootings are on the rise. Assessing the exact number of school shootings is difficult, and data on the use of guns and related incidents is lacking.<sup>24</sup> It has been reported that

#### Deadliest school shootings in US history

- On April 20, 1999, 12 students and one teacher were killed at **Columbine High School** in Columbine, Colorado. 24 people were injured. In addition to the shootings, the complex, carefully planned attack involved a fire bomb to divert firefighters, bombs in the cafeteria made out of propane tanks, 99 explosive devices, and car bombs.
- On December 14, 2012, a 20-year-old gunman fatally shot 20 children aged six and seven years, and 6 staff members, at **Sandy Hook Elementary School** in Newtown, Connecticut.
- On February 14, 2018, 14 students and 3 staff members were killed during a shooting at **Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School** in Parkland, Florida, by a 19-year-old gunman and former student of the school. 17 others were injured.
- On May 18, 2018, 10 people were killed and another 13 were injured at a shooting at **Santa Fe High School**, in Santa Fe, Texas.



the US government has cut funding for research on gun violence, and investigations of the circumstances under which school shootings take place, to almost zero. <sup>25</sup>



*“Every gunshot I heard was the sound of my brain going deeper and deeper into a shock. My body was there, under a table, fearing for my life. But my mind was still in my desk, next to the door, laughing with Alyssa. I look at my friend. And within seconds, Alyssa is struck with bullets. She is dying. My friend, who I was talking with two minutes before, is dying.”*

Eden Hebron, 15, student at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School. <sup>26</sup>

### 3.2 The debate: gun control vs. mental health

What are the factors causing school shootings and how can we prevent them in the future? The lack of scientific research and data on school shootings makes it difficult to achieve a good understanding of the circumstances under which these events take place, and to identify effective ways to prevent them. The development of evidence-based interventions can only happen through a better and broader understanding of the problem.

Arguments about how to prevent school shootings are concentrated in the USA around gun control and mental health. The shooting in Parkland reignited what was already a heated debate.

#### Gun control

Those advocating for stricter gun control attribute the high number of incidents in the USA to the availability of firearms. The USA tops the list of countries for gun ownership by citizens, with 89 guns for every 100 residents. <sup>27</sup>

This is seen by many as the key explanation for the high number of public mass shootings in the USA, including those at schools. Lankford, who studied mass shootings in 171 countries in the years 1966–2012, suggests that public mass shooters in the USA are significantly more likely to arm themselves with multiple weapons and attack at school and workplace settings, while offenders from other countries are more likely to strike at military sites. <sup>28</sup>

School shootings cannot be seen outside the wider debate on gun violence in the USA, according to this side of the debate. Research based on data from the *Centers for Disease Control and Prevention* shows that at state level, there is a correlation between rates of gun ownership and rates of childhood gun fatalities. <sup>29</sup> A 2017 study published in *Pediatrics* shows that firearms injuries are the third leading cause of death among children aged 1 through 17 in the USA. 1267 children die each year from firearm-related injuries and 5790 are treated for gunshot wounds. <sup>30</sup>

Advocates for stricter gun control plea for raising the age at which you can legally own a gun, more stringent universal background checks, mandates on safe storage of firearms, a ban on firearm enhancements such as bump stocks (which make guns quasi-automatic), federal registration of gun owners and restrictions for people who are convicted of domestic abuse.

#### Mental Health

Other voices in the debate focus on the person behind the gun. They explain school shootings in terms of family circumstances and mental health issues on the side of the perpetrator and plea for more counselors and better mental health services. In a study on school shootings, Lee found that 61% of the attackers demonstrated a history of suicide attempts, and had been showing symptoms of extreme depression or desperation prior to the attack. <sup>31</sup> The *Safe Schools Initiative Report* shows that 71% of the attackers were victims of bullying. 87% of the perpetrators left behind evidence that they were victims of severe bullying. <sup>32</sup> Despite the vulnerability of adolescents in particular, 75% of students struggling with mental health issues do not receive care from mental health services. <sup>33</sup>

However, the focus on mental health in the gun violence debate is misguided, according to others, who stress that the overwhelming majority of people who suffer from mental health problems do not engage in violent acts. Moreover, they note, framing school shootings as a mental health issue is disrespectful to the greater majority of harmless people struggling with mental disorders. <sup>34</sup>

### March For Our Lives – the students' solution for creating safer schools and communities

The students of March For Our Lives compiled a plan, listing ten actions to save lives, stop gun violence and create safer schools and communities. These include funding research into gun violence, universal background checks for those wanting to obtain a firearm, limiting firing power on the streets and funding intervention programs that address the root causes of violence.

For more information <https://marchforourlives.com/policy/>.



## 4. Conclusion and recommendations: *All violence against children is preventable*



*“No violence against children is justifiable and all violence against children is preventable.”*

Abraham M. Keita (18, Liberia), Winner of the International Children’s Peace Prize 2015.

Violence is a daily reality for many children, at home, at play and at school. More than 100,000 children die from violence every year, and others suffer the effects well into adulthood. This is a violation of Article 19 of the UNCRC, which stipulates that every child has the right to a safe environment to grow up in, protected from all kinds of violence.

School should be a safe place where young people can grow and develop without fear. School shootings are a very real threat to many children, devastating families, creating a lifetime of trauma for survivors, and affecting millions more children by putting them in a permanent state of alert in their learning environment.

To prevent school shootings, we need a better understanding of the causes, and therefore more academic research, and better data, therefore detailed registration of incidents by national governments.

### That is why we propose the following recommendations:

- Universal agreement on the definition of a school shooting to enable meaningful statistical comparisons.
- The collection of nationwide data on violent incidents at schools, including factual circumstances such as perpetrator, number of casualties, weapons used.
- The provision of funding for scientific research and the development of evidence-based interventions to prevent violence in schools.



## Endnotes

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# There's more than meets the eye

Our society faces challenges every day. We would like to make a meaningful difference that goes beyond our day-to-day work. We take responsibility for the effects of our activities from a social, ecological and economical perspective and we are especially engaged when it concerns children and their rights.

That is why we are proud legal partner of KidsRights and help the foundation to advocate the realisation of equal fundamental rights for children according to the UN Convention of the rights of a child.

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