Emergency Preparedness at School: Leveraging Parents' Perspectives on School Violence

Supplemental Resource

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Background

Casualties from school shootings have been increasing in recent years,[1] and parents are increasingly concerned about school violence.[2,3] Parental concern about school violence and school shootings generally increases after school shootings with greater media coverage. Recent levels of concern are higher than they have been in the past two decades.[2] It is unknown how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted parents' concerns about school violence.

Additionally, limited research has focused on the parental perceptions of emergency preparedness in schools and their satisfaction with school safety protocols. Schools engage parents in emergency preparedness planning to varying degrees. Parents' input in emergency preparedness may provide useful insight into future planning. This presentation analyzes parental perceptions and preferences relating to school safety emergencies and implications for school emergency preparedness plans.

Objectives

- To describe parental concerns about school violence and parental preferences for school emergency preparedness.
- To discuss potential modifications to school emergency preparedness protocols to improve parental satisfaction.
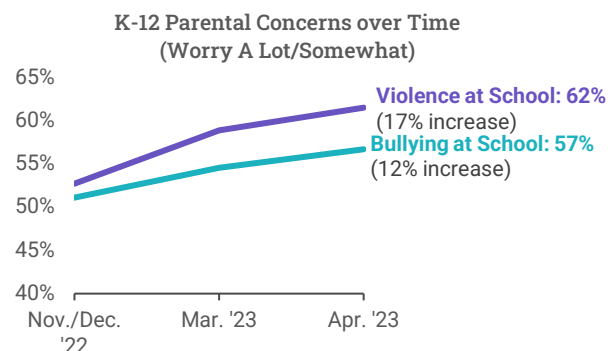
Methodology

Seven focus groups with 37 parents were held in January 2023. An online survey was conducted in three waves in November/December 2022, March 2023, and April 2023 with a total of 4,219 parent respondents (Wave 1 N=1,406, Wave 2 N=1,387, Wave 3 N=1,426). The content of the second wave of the survey focused more heavily on issues of school violence.

Inductive thematic analysis was used for focus group analysis. Survey responses were weighted to represent the US school parent population. Bivariate and regression analyses were used to analyze survey data. Analytic methods are described more in detail with each set of analyses below.

Analyses and Findings

Quantitative Analysis 1: Trends in Parental Concerns

Change over time in parents' concerns about school violence and bullying was evaluated using a chi-square (χ^2) difference test comparing the first wave of survey data (Nov./Dec. 2022) to the third wave of survey data (Apr. 2023). As depicted in the graph, parental concern about school violence and bullying both increased between November/December 2022 and April 2023 (χ^2 p-value<0.01 for both tests).


K-12 Parental Concerns over Time
(Worry A Lot/Somewhat)

Violence at School: 62% (17% increase)
Bullying at School: 57% (12% increase)

Quantitative Analysis 2: Emergency Notifications

The relationship between parental satisfaction with their child's school's emergency notification system and parental concern about school violence was tested using Somers' *D* hypothesis test for non-normal weighted data. Only data from the second survey wave was included in this analysis, as the parental satisfaction with schools' emergency notification systems was only assessed during this wave (N=1,387). There was a marginally significant relationship detected (Somers' *D* p-value=0.063).
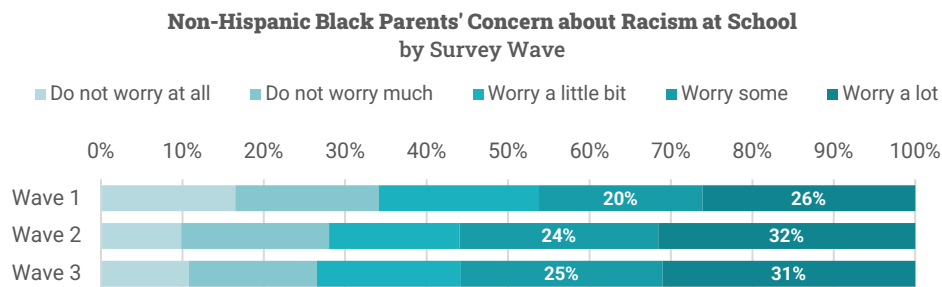
Parents were also surveyed during the second survey wave about how they currently receive notifications about emergencies at their child's school. Eighty-eight percent (88%) of parents received notifications about emergencies directly on their phone (e.g., via text or phone call).

Parental Concern about School Violence by Rating of Schools' Emergency Notification System

Percent of Parents Who Worried A Lot or Some
Wave 2 Survey

Rating	Percent
Excellent	54%
Very good	59%
Good	62%
Fair	63%
Poor	77%

Rating of School's Emergency Notification System

Notification methods were then tested for relationships with parental satisfaction with schools' emergency notification systems. Notification methods were individually added to a multivariable logistic regression model with parental satisfaction as the outcome variable (rated their child's school's emergency notification system as good, very good, or excellent). The model also controlled for household income, rurality, and child's school level, which were significant predictors. After controlling for all other variables, parents who received notifications via automated text, text/phone tree, or via email were significantly more likely to be satisfied with their schools' notification system (respective adjusted odds ratios: 1.9, p<0.01; 1.9, p<0.01; 1.5, p=0.03).
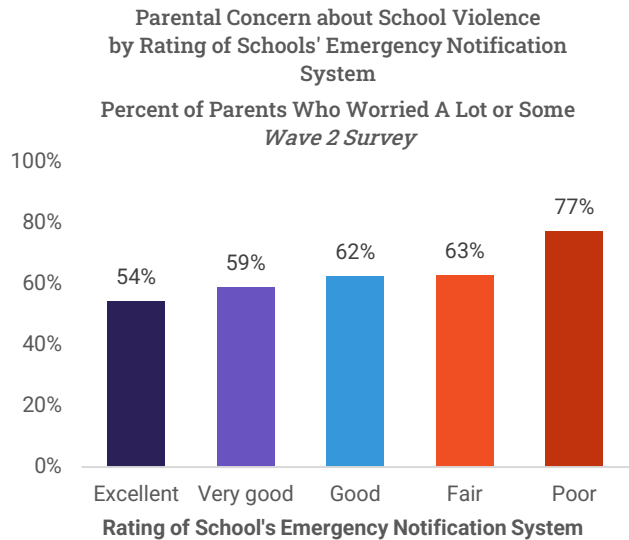
Quantitative Analysis 3 (Supplemental Analysis): Racism and School Safety
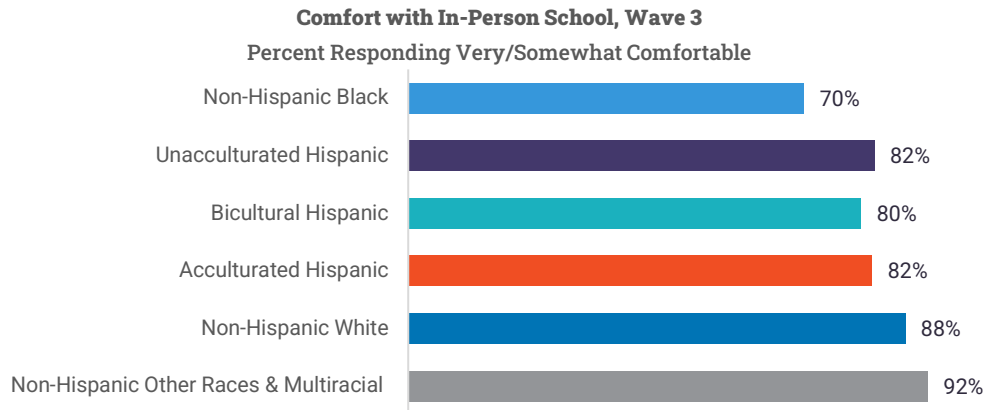
Parents of color had high levels of concern about their child experiencing racism at school, particularly less acculturated Hispanic parents and non-Hispanic Black parents. Non-Hispanic Black parents' concern about racism at school significantly increased over the school year, particularly from the first wave in November/December 2022 to the second wave in March 2023 (Somers' *D* p-value=0.01).

Non-Hispanic Black Parents' Concern about Racism at School
by Survey Wave

Legend: ▪ Do not worry at all ▪ Do not worry much ▪ Worry a little bit ▪ Worry some ▪ Worry a lot

Wave	Worry some	Worry a lot
Wave 1	20%	26%
Wave 2	24%	32%
Wave 3	25%	31%

A multivariable linear regression model was used to examine this increase in concern among Black parents. Survey wave and rurality were significant predictors of Black parental concern about racism at school. Other parental concerns were entered individually into the model to test for significance – Black parents who were concerned about bullying, their child struggling emotionally/mentally/socially, and their child learning inaccurate information at school were all significantly more likely to worry about their child experiencing racism at school. Additionally, Black parents who were concerned about their child experiencing violence at school were more likely to worry about racism at school, and when concerns about violence at school were entered into the model, the effect of survey wave was no longer significant. This indicates that Black parents' increasing concerns about racism may be tied to their increasing concerns about school violence – Black parents may not only be concerned about racism and violence separately, but about race-based violence towards Black children.

Quantitative Analysis 4 (Supplemental Analysis): Racism and Comfort with In-Person School

Parental comfort with in-person school was another area with disparities by race/ethnicity and was impacted by concerns about racism. In general, parents' comfort level with in-person school was primarily driven by COVID-related concerns. However, after adjusting for these concerns in a multivariable regression model, racial disparities still remained. Non-Hispanic Black parents were the least likely racial/ethnic group to feel comfortable with sending their child to school in person.

Comfort with In-Person School, Wave 3
Percent Responding Very/Somewhat Comfortable

Race/Ethnicity	Percent
Non-Hispanic Black	70%
Unacculturated Hispanic	82%
Bicultural Hispanic	80%
Acculturated Hispanic	82%
Non-Hispanic White	88%
Non-Hispanic Other Races & Multiracial	92%

To further examine these disparities, additional parental concerns were added to the multivariable model. Only after adjusting for parental concerns about racism at school did the racial disparity disappear for Black parents. Black parents who worried some or a lot about racism at school were less likely to feel comfortable with in-person school. This implies that Black parents are more likely to feel uncomfortable sending their children to school because of racism, in addition to COVID.

Qualitative Theme 1: School Violence Since the Pandemic

Parents in focus groups repeatedly expressed concern about a mental health crisis among young people of all ages that is not being addressed. Parents felt schools should be doing more to address youth mental health in the aftermath of the pandemic, but also recognized that schools are short-staffed. Parents of older students had concerns about active shooters and general aggression and fighting in schools due to unresolved mental health issues.

"My biggest concern right now is probably mental health. [...] I'm seeing a big difference in behavior. And there's a lot of aggression, there's a lot of fights, and just a lot of kids are not okay. And I can't help but think that, since I've never seen this happen to this degree, that it has to be attributed to the pandemic. I'm not 100% sure, but I mean, it just looks like it has to kind of relate to that. And I don't feel like there's enough counselors at the school to address all of those issues. A lot of times, teachers aren't trained to notice certain things like, oh, this child is not okay. And I feel like that's a really, really big concern for me right now."

- Non-Hispanic, White mother from Florida

Qualitative Theme 2: Active Shooter Drills

When asked about their concerns for their children at school, parents in focus groups talked at length about their concerns about school violence, active shooters, and active shooter/intruder drills. Parents generally felt that active shooter drills were necessary, despite recognizing that they can be traumatizing to children.

Parents suggested approaches that could reduce the trauma for children:

- Some parents suggested that less realistic drills may be beneficial for younger children – others said their schools already adapted drills for younger children.

- One parent suggested holding drills without students present, and other parents supported this idea.

Several parents also expressed great concern about the frequency of drills. Multiple parents said that their children's schools were required to do active shooter drills monthly, but because the school year does not extend year-round, that resulted in drills more than once a month. All of the parents of children in these schools felt strongly that this was too frequent. Parents who were satisfied with the frequency of active shooter drills at their child's school generally reported drills once or twice per year, or up to once a quarter.

Conclusions

- Mental health and school violence are serious concerns for parents, and their concerns have risen since the onset of the pandemic.

- Parents of color also have serious concerns about their child experiencing racism at school, which contributes to their concerns about their child's safety at school.

- Schools may need more supports for students who are at risk of aggressive or violent behaviors.

- Opportunities for parents to provide constructive feedback to schools to address school safety concerns, emergency preparedness (including active shooter drills), and racism may help to improve parents' perception of their child's safety at school.

Acknowledgements

References

1. Riedman, David (2023). K-12 School Shooting Database. https://k12ssdb.org/

2. Gallup Poll Social Series: Work and Education – Final Topline. 2023. Accessed September 22, 2023. https://news.gallup.com/file/poll/510410/230831SchoolSafety.pdf

3. Hurst K. About a third of K-12 parents are very or extremely worried a shooting could happen at their children's school. Pew Research Center. Published October 18, 2022. https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2022/10/18/about-a-third-of-k-12-parents-are-very-or-extremely-worried-a-shooting-could-happen-at-their-childrens-school/