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Lockdown Drills Help Children Feel Safer In School, Study Finds

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Around 98% of public K-12 schools carry out lockdown drills (Photo by Phil Mislinski/Getty Images) GETTY IMAGES

Mass shooting lockdown drills help children who have been exposed to violence feel safer at school, according to a new [study](#).

The findings contradict previous [research](#) which suggested the drills actually end up traumatizing children without making them feel safer.

Approximately [98%](#) of public K-12 schools in the U.S. carry out lockdown drills, introduced after the 1999 Columbine High School shootings, when two teenagers shot dead 12 fellow students and a teacher.

The drills aim to help prepare children for shooting events at school, with many states requiring them to be carried out every academic year.

Although there may be differences between schools, there are a number of elements they have in common: locking classroom doors, turning off the lights, staying out of sight and keeping quiet.

While mass shootings attract considerable attention, they are often the rarest type of violence in school, with children much more likely to be exposed to bullying or physical or verbal aggression.

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For the latest study, researchers aimed to look at how exposure to violence affected children’s views of school safety, and how those views were affected by lockdown drills.

“It is important for students to perceive their schools to be safe because it can impact how they function as students generally,” said Dr Jaclyn Schildkraut, executive director of the Regional Gun Violence Research Consortium at the Rockefeller Institute of Government and co-author of the study.

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Students who do not feel safe at school can be prone to anxiety and depression, with their academic performance suffering as a result, she said.



“In addition, not feeling safe at school can lead students to have increased perceptions of risk – thinking they are more likely to be harmed at school than they actually are – or be adversely impacted by practices designed to keep them safe, like lockdown drills,” she added.

Around 8,600 students in a large school district in New York State took part in the study, published in the *Journal of School Violence*.

The students — all fifth grade and above — were asked how safe they felt at school and whether they felt prepared for lockdowns and other emergencies.

They were also asked if they had been exposed to violence, including people bringing guns or knives to school, and witnessing or being involved in fights or bullying.

The students, who were aged 14 on average, had been exposed to 1.9 types of violence on average, predominantly witnessing fights or bullying.

They then took part in a lockdown drill and filled out the survey again, followed by training in how to respond in an emergency and a second lockdown drill, before filling in the survey for a third time.

Survey results showed that the more types of violence students had been exposed to at school, the less safe they felt.

But taking part in lockdown drills and training helped mitigate the effects of this exposure to violence, according to the study.

“Participating in drills may be a way to help students who have been exposed to violence feel safer in schools,” said Schildkraut, who carried out the study along with researchers at the University at Buffalo, University at Albany and Syracuse University.

Previous research that suggested drills traumatize children without making them feel safer had been cited in calls to abandon them, but Schildkraut, an expert on mass shootings research, said the findings of the latest study suggested lockdown drills were beneficial.



“This finding provides policymakers with direct empirical evidence against calls for lockdown and other safety drills to be abandoned on the basis that they traumatize children without making them feel safer,” she added.

The main purpose of the drills was to help participants build muscle memory, so they can respond to emergencies quickly and without conscious effort, Schildkraut said.

“It is possible that the confidence gained from taking part lockdown drills may help to offset the negative effects of exposure to violence over time,” she added.

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