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Q&A DECEMBER 14, 2023

Are School Shooting Drills Safe for Today's Youth?

BY ISIDORO RODRIGUEZ ⌚ 9 MINS READ



A **federal report** released in September found that there were 188 school shootings during the 2021-22 academic year, the highest in more than two decades. National Center for Education Statistics report authors noted that there were half that number of school shootings (93) during the previous year and that, after retail and other business settings, educational settings were the second most common location of active shooter incidents.

In response to this ongoing rise in school shootings, a **majority of schools** around the country have been adopting and practicing **lockdown drills**: procedures that train children and faculty what to do in the event of an active shooter situation either inside or outside of the school.

Today, lockdown drills have become **almost as commonplace as fire drills**, a fact that has ignited a heated public debate around the balance between a desire to safeguard children

against potentially violent situations and to protect their mental, emotional and physical health from the damage that some say these drills can cause.

Jaclyn Schildkraut, Executive Director of the Regional Gun Violence Research Consortium, believes that we can do both.

In her recent book, "**Lockdown Drills: Connecting Research and Best Practices for School Administrators, Teachers, and Parents**," Schildkraut argues that the controversy around lockdown drills is based on the fact that too many schools engage in bad practices.

She argues that, although they are an unfortunate reality of our times, when done correctly lockdown drills can be as harmless as a fire drill.

In a conversation with The Crime Report, Schildkraut describes what a successful and safe lockdown drill looks like, how the research conducted by her, and others, shows both their benefit and effectiveness, and why the current conversation on the subject has been hijacked by extreme opinions on both sides — to the detriment of children's safety everywhere.

The Crime Report: Why did you decide to write this book now?

Jaclyn Schildkraut: When we (Dr. Amanda Nickerson and I) were working on the lockdown research, we actually hadn't thought about a book at that point – we were focused on individual studies through journal articles. We actually were approached by 2 different publishers who had seen our work on the subject and were invited to submit proposals.

It was at a time when the national conversation about lockdown drills and harm to students was prevalent in the media and the narrative didn't match what our research was showing. So it seemed like the perfect time to craft a book to address and hopefully correct some of the misconceptions but also situate these drills in both the research and the broader context of school safety.

TCR: Why is it important to distinguish between active shooter drills and lockdown drills?

JS: Active shooter drills have never really been defined in terms of a specific protocol or set of steps to be practiced. It is more of a blanket term that is loosely applied to any practice that people use to prepare for an active shooter. Because of that, there is both a lot of variability but also it is really only useful for one situation – active shooters.

Lockdown drills, by comparison, use a very specific set of procedures and can be used when there is ANY imminent threat inside of a building, including –but not limited to –an active

shooter. (Irate parents, dangerous animals, and the like also can trigger a lockdown.) Understanding it in this context removes some of the anxiety about “active shooters.”

TCR: What constitutes a successful and safe lockdown drill?

JS: Lockdowns are designed to build distance – both in the form of time and space – between a threat and whomever it is trying to harm. To accomplish this, a specific set of procedures is used. First, the door should be locked. This creates a barrier between the threat and intended targets. We also know that door locks are the # 1 life-saving device in an active assailant situation.

Next, lights are typically turned off to provide an added layer of concealment. Occupants of the location move out of sight of any interior windows and maintain silence. Finally, there should never be responses to knocks at the door – anyone who would need to access the location (e.g., school administrators, law enforcement) would have the necessary keys. A successful drill occurs when rooms are able to correctly complete each of these steps.

TCR: What do you say to the people who argue that we should get rid of drills entirely and focus, instead, on legislation?

JS: It isn't either/or. Certainly, there are legislative efforts that can be carried out to help with prevention efforts. In reality, however, we will never be able to fully prevent these tragedies from occurring. As such, lockdown drills are a way to ensure that people have the necessary skills and procedures to stay safe if the worst day ever happens.

These skills (e.g., making decisions based on intel and environment during stressful situations) also have utility beyond schools and workplaces and can be useful at any point in life.

TCR: How effective can these drills be when carried out correctly?

JS: When lockdown procedures are used in the real world, they have life-saving impacts. Our research has found that successful deployment of a lockdown procedure during a real-world mass shooting in a school reduces total casualties (injuries and fatalities) by 59%, on-scene deaths by 79%, and all deaths by 63%. It also shows that lockdowns have protective effects in non-school settings as well.

TCR: What is the problem with the “run, hide, fight” model of these drills and trainings?

JS: Run Hide Fight was never actually designed for K-12 schools – it was developed for open-concept workplaces after the Mumbai, India terrorist attacks. For kids, they tend to remember everything in the order that they are taught it. Since we know that being behind that locked

door (with an adult) is the best possible option outside of not being in the building in the first place, we don't want to encourage them in thinking that "run" should be the immediate response.

Certainly, there will be cases where this is a good option (e.g., getting stuck in the hallway, being outside the building already, in open areas), but we talk to them about this as self-evacuation, which again involves specific procedures (e.g., getting to a safe location, notifying parents) and is discussed as a last resort.

TCR: What is protection motivation theory and why is it relevant/important to understand when discussing lockdown drills?

JS: Protection motivation theory refers to the idea that in order for people to engage in protective behaviors, they have to perceive some type of risk, even minimally, to themselves and/or those around them.

In the context of lockdown drills, this can help us understand the exchange between, for example, students' perceived safety and emergency preparedness, such that if there is a slight decrease in safety and increase in preparedness, it is a result of perceiving a risk of harm and acting accordingly to counteract that.

TCR: What do you say to the criticism that lockdown drills only help a potential shooter better plan their attack?

JS: That is certainly a valid concern given that the majority of school shooters are current or former students. In reality, however, these individuals typically do not have the time to defeat the plan. Most mass public shootings are over in 5 minutes or less. That does not give them time to defeat door locks, seek out victims who are out of sight, and the like. Instead, they are seeking targets who are largely out in the open and who they do not necessarily have to work to harm.

TCR: How has the media failed in the covering of this topic?

JS: I think the biggest way that this has occurred is the failure to present both sides of the debate. The majority of the coverage has focused on "drills gone wrong" – the cases of teachers being shot with pellet guns and kids being exposed to crisis actors, mock gunmen, and other sensorial techniques. Certainly, these drills are concerning and should be illuminated as "what not to do."

The failure to provide the counter narrative, however, has led to all drills being treated the same as these bad ones. We know from our research that there are ways that drills can be

conducted in a trauma-informed way that empowers students to feel prepared and improves their overall perceptions of safety at their school, yet this is omitted from the conversation most of the time. There needs to be more focus on the evidence rather than just the emotion.

TCR: What are the shortcomings of the studies that say these drills are causing psychological damage to children?

JS: These statements are often made in very broad-sweeping strokes. Again, there are some practices where this certainly could be the case when not done using trauma-informed principles. When these principles are used, however, we find the exact opposite – lesser fear of harm, lower perceived risk of school shootings, and even lower anxiety. It ultimately comes down to how drills are being done.

TCR: Is the solution national standards and are those something you believe could actually be enforced?

JS: I definitely think that more guidance is needed from the national level, such as the U.S. Department of Education, because schools often look to these types of agencies for guidance and resources.

Unfortunately, decisions about policy and guidance options are often left to the states and sometimes even districts themselves, so I don't know how feasible a national adoption or enforcement could be. But I do think getting more guidance out that is based on the evidence would be helpful to schools.

TCR: This topic is an emotional one, for obvious reasons, for a lot of people. Does this emotion and sentiment impede progress and how do we move this conversation forward?

JS: The emotion component is important – this is a sensitive issue that people care about and we must be mindful not to ignore or minimize that. I think that the passion for the topic also opens the dialogue, so in that sense, the emotion is important. Emotion alone, however, cannot carry this conversation forward.

We have to pair it with empirical evidence so that we can make sure that any decisions made about this or any aspect of student's safety are made with all considerations of student safety in mind.



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Peter on December 15, 2023 5:08 pm

Hmmm. The police will surely have a key. Uvalde?

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