Violence Can Happen Here

This fact sheet presents key takeaways from a series of school emergency operations plan (EOP) studies conducted by RTI International's Center for Evidence-Based Strategies to Reduce Firearm Violence. Part of the National Institute of Justice's Comprehensive School Safety Initiative, the studies reviewed EOPs and conducted surveys and interviews with district staff, school staff, and students from across the United States between 2018 and 2020.

In the first study, 2,692 districts completed a survey on their emergency planning and training procedures, and 37 schools with comprehensive EOPs completed interviews. In the second study, 585 staff and 1,326 students completed surveys, and 104 staff and 58 students completed interviews from 10 schools.

> Although many schools have written procedures for responding to active shooter and other emergency scenarios, many students and staff lack a strong understanding of the details in these plans. Improving comprehension of procedures and roles and responsibilities is one of the most actionable steps schools can take to prepare for an emergency.

Basic EOP Knowledge

71%

Staff demonstrated strong comprehension of basic EOP information but weaker understanding of specific protocols (e.g., specific actions to take for a lockdown beyond locking doors, hiding out of sight, and turning off the lights).

49%

Students demonstrated much lower levels of EOP comprehension than staff, answering about half of the basic knowledge questions consistently with their school's EOP, and even less for advanced information.

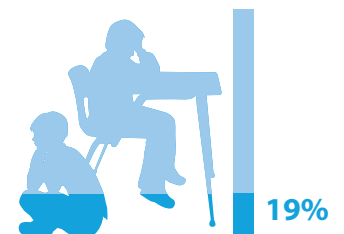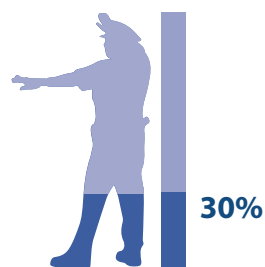## Knowledge of Specific Protocols

Lockdowns

51%

30%

Evacuations

41%

38%

Shelter-in-Place

36%

19%
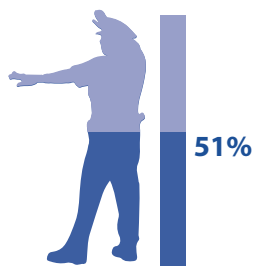
Access to and engagement with the school's emergency management system are critical for understanding emergency procedures and feeling safe at school (e.g., serving on a planning team, reading the EOP or receiving EOP training, having knowledge of their school's emergency concepts and protocols).

But not all staff have the same level of access and engagement—teaching assistants, paraeducators, food service staff, and newly employed staff were all less connected to emergency planning efforts, despite a desire to be more involved and the logistical challenges of doing so.

Here are some actionable recommendations for increasing emergency preparedness and ultimately protecting staff and students from incidents of violence:

Create an inclusive culture around emergency preparedness in which all staff and students are recognized as vital parts of the system, while balancing access to highly sensitive information on a need-to-know basis.

Conduct a variety of emergency drills that vary by time (e.g., during a class change when most students are in the hallways), location (e.g., when students are gathered in the cafeteria during lunch), and surprise element (unannounced).

Streamline written protocols to improve understanding and retention of complex information. Create quick-reference guides (such as handouts, flipcharts, and other succinct visual aids) derived from the larger EOP to ensure essential information is readily available when needed.

Create specialized protocols for atypical situations (e.g., conducting a lockdown with special needs students, initiating a reverse evacuation during an outdoor activity, announcing an emergency procedure during an after-school event).

Consider EOP development to be an ongoing process, not a static document that gets shelved. Update EOPs immediately after protocols change or new ones are added.

Consider incorporating more scenario-based training opportunities for all staff and students. Tabletop exercises provide opportunities to talk through various emergency scenarios in informal settings.