Over the last decade, the overall safety of the nation's elementary and secondary schools has improved (Irwin et al., 2022). Violent incidents, including physical fights, weapons charges, robbery, assault, and rape, have significantly decreased (NCES, 2022a, 2022b). Notwithstanding these improvements, there are areas in which America's schools are less safe than a decade ago (Irwin et al., 2022), as casualties from school shootings, reported incidences of cyberbullying, and student acts of disrespect toward teachers have increased.

These worrying trends may help us understand the negative public perception of school safety. The extensive national media attention on violent attacks in schools may create unwarranted public fear (Glassner, 2004). In one public opinion poll among adults, it was found that school violence is consistently in the top 10 health concerns for children across the U.S. (C.S. Mott Children's Hospital, 2015). In a more recent poll, 44 percent of K-12 parents feared for their child's safety at school (Brenan, 2022).

In this policy brief, I review the trends taken to improve school safety. While individual measures, such as school resource officers (SROs) or controlled access to schools, inconclusively impact physical and perceptual components of school safety, research suggests a comprehensive safety plan can create safe, secure schools. I conclude with evidence-based actions that Nevada lawmakers can take to improve school safety.

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Trends in Physical Security Measures

Over time, schools have increased the use of physical security measures including the following (see Figure 1):

- controlled access to school buildings during school hours
- security cameras used to monitor the school
- faculty and staff requirement to wear identification badges or picture IDs
- random sweeps for contraband
- student requirement to wear uniforms
- requirement for students to wear badges or picture IDs
- random metal detector checks

Figure 1. Safety and Security Measures Used in Public Schools, 2009 – 2010 and 2019 – 2020

Whether the increased deployment of physical security measures has made schools safer is a matter of scholarly debate. Table 1 details recent research studies that explore the relationship between physical security measures and student, faculty, and staff perceptions of school safety. The table groups studies by whether they found that students, staff, and/or administrators had higher or lower safety perceptions with specific physical safety measures in place.
## Table 1. Studies on Physical Security and Perceived Safety

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Authors</th>
<th>Sample</th>
<th>Physical Safety Measures</th>
<th>Findings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Higher Perceptions of Safety</strong></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bosworth et al., 2011</td>
<td>70 students and 74 staff from 12 Arizona schools</td>
<td>Cameras, monitors, locked doors, gates, police, SROs</td>
<td>Students reported feeling safe when schools have cameras, locked doors, gates, and SROs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tillyer et al., 2010</td>
<td>2,644 students from 58 schools in Kentucky</td>
<td>Police involvement, metal detectors, locker checks, and backpack ban</td>
<td>Feelings of personal safety were higher if metal detectors were in place.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chrusciel et al., 2015</td>
<td>228 law enforcement executives and 1,086 school principals in South Carolina</td>
<td>SRO</td>
<td>Schools with SROs were perceived to be safer, schools with armed teachers were not considered safer.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wood &amp; Hampton, 2021</td>
<td>3,970 teachers in one Midwest state</td>
<td>SRO</td>
<td>Teachers reported feelings of safety and security with the presence of SROs in schools.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Lower Perceptions of Safety</strong></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Booren et al., 2011</td>
<td>184 students and 32 teachers from a Pacific Northwest high school</td>
<td>Video surveillance, metal detectors, stricter disciplinary procedures, tighter security, and personal searches</td>
<td>Teachers rated these strategies more important than students; feelings of personal safety among students were lower.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Booren &amp; Handy, 2009</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Permean-Chaney &amp; Sutton, 2013</td>
<td>13,386 students from 130 schools from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health</td>
<td>SRO, metal detectors, video cameras, locked doors, hall passes, visitor signs, closed campuses, and dress codes</td>
<td>Metal detectors and the number of physical security measures were associated with lower feelings of personal safety.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gastic, 2011</td>
<td>7,618 students from National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health</td>
<td>Metal detectors</td>
<td>Feelings of personal safety were lower.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shamserad et al., 2021</td>
<td>3,640 students from 12 schools in a Midwestern state</td>
<td>Arming school personnel</td>
<td>Students felt less safe if teachers were armed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weiler &amp; Armenta, 2014</td>
<td>19 school principals from Colorado</td>
<td>Arming school personnel</td>
<td>Principals perceived their schools as sufficiently safe without arming school personnel.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 1 makes clear that whether the implementation of physical security measures makes students and staff feel safer is not settled science. There is some evidence that students feel safer with SROs on campus (Chrusciel et al., 2015), but only limited evidence that cameras, monitors, and locked doors improve students’ sense of safety (Bosworth et al., 2011). In contrast, both the presence of metal detectors and the presence of armed teachers are associated with students feeling less safe (Gastic, 2011; Perumean-Chaney & Sutton, 2013; Shamserad et al., 2021; Weiler & Armenta, 2014). Additionally, as the number of physical security measures increases, students tend to report feeling less safe (Reingle Gonzalez, et al., 2016).

Beyond perceptions of safety, scholars have also explored whether physical safety measures reduce violent and non-violent victimization and disciplinary offenses. The more recent evidence in this regard is shown in Table 2. There is little systematic evidence that the presence of SROs reduces victimization rates within schools (Link, 2010; Swartz et al., 2015), and some evidence that their presence increases exclusionary discipline for small disciplinary offenses (Fisher & Hennessy, 2015; Theriot, 2009). Only one intervention—the provision of adult monitoring in hallways—is associated with a reduction in victimization on school campuses (Blosnich & Bossarte, 2011).
### Table 2. Studies on Physical Security and Safety Outcomes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AUTHORS</th>
<th>SAMPLE</th>
<th>SPECIFIC MEASURES</th>
<th>FINDINGS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>HIGHER LEVELS OF SAFETY</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Blosnich &amp; Bossarte, 2011</td>
<td>5,722 participants on the 2007 School Crime Supplement</td>
<td>Student ID badges, security guards, adults monitoring in hallways, security cameras, and code of conduct</td>
<td>Adults in hallways as the only safety measure is associated with a reduction in victimization.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>LOWER LEVELS/NO CHANGE IN SAFETY</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Lesneskie &amp; Block, 2016</td>
<td>1,942 schools from the School Survey on Crime and Safety</td>
<td>SRO and use of clear backpacks</td>
<td>Presence of SROs and the use of clear backpacks are significantly related to increased violence.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Devlin et al., 2018</td>
<td>480 schools from School Survey on Crime and Safety; controlled for pre-SRO crime levels using longitudinal three-year sample</td>
<td>SRO</td>
<td>SROs do not have an effect on bullying in schools.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fisher &amp; Hennessy, 2015</td>
<td>Meta Analysis</td>
<td>SRO</td>
<td>When compared, students in schools with SROs are 121 times more at risk of exclusionary discipline than students in schools without SROs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gottfredson et al., 2020</td>
<td>33 public schools (treatment) and 72 public schools (comparison); Administrative data-disciplinary incidences</td>
<td>SRO</td>
<td>Schools with SROs showed an increase in drug-related and weapon-related offenses and was statistically significant. The increase of students receiving disciplinary actions in the schools with SROs was 2.1 times greater.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swartz et al., 2009</td>
<td>1699 elementary, middle, and high schools from the School Survey on Crime and Safety</td>
<td>SRO</td>
<td>SROs were not found to significantly reduce violent crime.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theriot, 2009</td>
<td>28 middle, high, and alternative schools in a Southeastern school district</td>
<td>SRO</td>
<td>SROs did significantly increase the rate of arrest; however, ceased to be significant when controlling for school-level poverty.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Trends in Psychological Security Measures

Promoting feelings of safety (i.e., psychological safety) is also necessary for learning environments to be effective (Cornell & Huang, 2016; Lenzi et al., 2017; Nickerson et al., 2021; Osher & Kendziora, 2010). In Table 3, I overview interventions designed to enhance psychological safety within schools. For more than 20 years the PBIS framework has been utilized in schools to use data to develop and support students’ academic, social, emotional, and behavioral success (Sugai & Horner, 2006). PBIS has decreased disciplinary issues and reduced verbal and physical assault in schools (Bradshaw et al., 2010; Bradshaw et al., 2015; Caldarella et al., 2011). In a recent report, it was found that the implementation of PBIS reduced suspension rates by 20 percent (McIntosh et al., 2018). Finally, in a systematic review, researchers found in nearly half of the studies they reviewed that PBIS implementation led to significant positive effects on disciplinary referrals and suspensions (Noltemeyer et al., 2019).

SEL programs are those that incorporate educational approaches to student learning about social and emotional skills and competencies in demonstrating self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationships, and decision-making (Greenberg et al., 2017). SEL programs provide improved student social competence, reduced disruptive behavior, and increased academic results (Durlak et al., 2011; Espelage et al., 2015). In one study where PBIS and SEL programs were merged, the researchers found increased mental health outcomes and a reduction in disciplinary behaviors (Cook et al., 2015).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AUTHORS</th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bradshaw et al., 2010</td>
<td>Five-year randomized controlled trial; 37 elementary schools</td>
<td>PBIS</td>
<td>Schools with staff trained in PBIS had significant reductions in office discipline referrals and student suspensions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bradshaw et al., 2015</td>
<td>12,344 elementary school children</td>
<td>PBIS</td>
<td>Students identified as at-risk or high risk of an office disciplinary referral in schools where PBIS had been implemented were significantly less likely to receive it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caldarella et al., 2011</td>
<td>10,000 student responses and 300 teacher responses in two middle schools</td>
<td>PBIS</td>
<td>Teacher ratings of school climate were statistically significant in the PBIS school. Student tardiness, unexcused absences, and office discipline referrals decreased and were statistically significant when compared to the control school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cook et al., 2015</td>
<td>Two large elementary schools; eight 4th and 5th grade classrooms (n = 191)</td>
<td>SEL and PBIS</td>
<td>Individually PBIS and SEL programs produce improvements in overall mental health function. However, when combined, the result is significantly greater improvements in overall mental health and reductions in externalizing behaviors.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Durlak et al., 2011</td>
<td>Meta-analysis of 213 school-based SEL programs, including 270,034 kindergarten through high school students</td>
<td>SEL</td>
<td>Students’ social and emotional skills, attitudes, behavior, and academic performance significantly improved.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Espelage et al., 2015</td>
<td>Two middle schools, sixth-grade students with disabilities (N = 123; intervention n = 47 and control n = 76)</td>
<td>SEL</td>
<td>In schools that implemented the SEL lessons, there was a reduction in bully perpetration among students with disabilities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McIntosh et al., 2018</td>
<td>U.S. schools 2013 - 2014 school year</td>
<td>PBIS</td>
<td>Schools where PBIS had been implemented with fidelity showed a 20% lower rate of suspension than the national average.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Noltemeyer et al., 2019</td>
<td>153 Ohio schools</td>
<td>PBIS</td>
<td>Higher PBIS implementation led to significantly lower number of out of school suspensions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tobin &amp; Vincent, 2011</td>
<td>46 schools</td>
<td>PBIS</td>
<td>School with PBIS showed a decrease of disproportionality in the discipline.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 3. Studies on Psychological Security and Safety Outcomes**
Planning for Comprehensive School Safety in Nevada

Physical security or psychological security measures by themselves are unlikely to make drastic improvements in safety of schools. In particular, the implementation of physical security measures can exacerbate students’ feelings of psychological safety and lead to the criminalization of smaller disciplinary offenses. Alternatively, only addressing the psychological security of students leaves schools vulnerable to bad actors. Finally, the siloed implementation of one-off psychological security interventions or physical security measures do not leverage the mutual strengths of physical security and mental health community partners for the benefit of students.

Rather, an integrated, comprehensive approach, in which the psychological supports provided to students are integrated with the physical securing of buildings, holds promise for sustained improvements to school safety. Instead of viewing school safety as a series of individual measures that may address the prevention of school violence and the protection of students, stakeholders should incorporate a variety of safety and security measures that cohesively interact with each other (Kingston et al., 2018). Figure 2 provides a framework of how individual physical and psychological safety measures can be part of a comprehensive school safety plan. Not leverage the mutual strengths of physical security and mental health community partners for the benefit of students.

“Physical security or psychological security measures by themselves are unlikely to make drastic improvements in safety of schools.”
At the core of a comprehensive safety plan is a collaborative team (i.e., school safety team) of school leaders, counselors, psychologists, SROs, social workers, teachers, and other stakeholders (Nickerson et al., 2021). It is the collaborative team that analyzes data, considers which safety measures to incorporate as part of the comprehensive safety plan (e.g., SROs, surveillance system, PBIS, etc.), and continues to collect and review student academic and behavioral data (Cornell et al., 2004) and schoolwide climate and culture surveys (Osher et al., 2016). This team can monitor and adjust or soften physical safety measures, if they begin to impede upon school climate or student psychological safety. In addition, they can oversee and enhance the implementation of psychological security measures if teachers need additional supports around PBIS, SEL, or multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS).
In recent years, policymakers in Nevada have made strides in codifying specific approaches to school safety. However, these approaches have yet to be integrated in their implementation. For example, Nevada statutes establish provisions for schools to be “safe and respectful learning environments” (NRS 388.121, 2015). Further, the Nevada legislature has stipulated rules prohibiting bullying, cyberbullying, and acts of discrimination (NRS 388.132, 2021). There are clear requirements for school policies to include training that promote safe positive learning environments (NRS 388.133, 2021). Finally, the Nevada Department of Education (NDE) has also provided guidance about school safety, specifically recognizing that “School safety is a multi-faceted endeavor which is guided by the principles of prevention, protection, and recovery” (NDE, n.d.). In addition, the Nevada School Safety Committee provided a draft report (Nevada School Safety Committee, 2022) of six recommendations to improve school safety. Within the committee’s recommendations are investing in mental health professionals and services in schools, ensuring safe schools through additional SROs and building safety, improving school safety planning through “Emergency Operations Plans,” providing legislation and budgetary authority to integrate SEL programming and scaling up MTSS, supporting schools with strategies to eliminate disproportionality of school discipline, and identifying interventions to address cyberbullying.

Instead of providing separate guidance to put together individual responses to prevention, protection, and recovery, the next step may be to integrate these individual measures into a comprehensive school safety and security plan. School districts and schools can do the following:

1. Develop comprehensive, data-driven safety and security plans through careful collaboration of a diverse team of school officials, students, and other stakeholders.
   a. Include strategies to collect and analyze data, determine the effectiveness of measures, and revisit the plan annually.
   b. Include purposeful work to create a positive school culture and an implemented multi-tiered system of supports for physical and psychological safety.

2. State and school officials should recognize that the perceptions of school safety may differ for students, teachers, administrators, and stakeholders. It is imperative to address safety in the aggregate rather than based on one group’s perceptions.
Conclusion

In recent years, Nevada has made a number of policy changes to address school safety. I argue that in order to enhance these measures they should be integrated into a comprehensive school safety plan. The comprehensive plan could include individual measures, including SROs, controlled entry, and students’ mental and behavioral health needs, and how these measures work together to improve overall safety and security. Further, the comprehensive school safety and security plan should be developed collaboratively, including multiple perspectives from principals, school counselors, school psychologists, SROs, school social workers, teachers, parents, students, and others the team identifies (Nickerson et al., 2021). Finally, procedural safeguards consist of both the development of thorough safety plans and training for staff and students (Lenhardt et al., 2017).

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References


References


