



# Billions are now spent to protect kids from school shootings. Has it made them safer?

By John Woodrow Cox and  
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ORLANDO — The expo had finally begun, and now hundreds of school administrators streamed into a sprawling, chandeliered ballroom where entrepreneurs awaited, each eager to explain why their product, above all others, was the one worth buying.

Waiters in white button-downs poured glasses of chardonnay and served meatballs wrapped with bacon. In one corner, guests posed with colorful boas and silly hats at a photo booth as a band played Jimmy Buffett covers to the rhythm of a steel drum. For a moment, the festive summer scene, in a hotel 10 miles from Walt Disney World, masked what had brought them all there.

This was the thriving business of campus safety, an industry fueled by an overwhelmingly American form of violence: school shootings.

At one booth, two gray-haired men were selling a 300-pound ballistic whiteboard — adorned with adorable animal illustrations and pocked with five bullet holes — that cost more than \$2,900.

“What we want to do is just to give the kids, the teachers, a chance,” one of them said.

“So they can buy a few minutes,” the other added.

Elsewhere at the July conference, vendors peddled tourniquets and pepper-ball guns, facial-recognition software and a security proposal that would turn former Special Operations officers into undercover teachers. Threaded into every pitch, just five months after a Parkland, Fla., massacre, was the implication that their product or service would make students safer — that, if purchased, it might save a life.





The schools that have experienced gun violence consistently cited simple, well-established safety measures as most effective at minimizing harm: drills that teach rapid lockdown and evacuation strategies, doors that can be secured in seconds and resource officers, or other adults, who act quickly.

But fear has long dictated what schools invest in, and although campus shootings remain extremely rare, many superintendents are under intense pressure from parents to do something — anything — to make their kids safer. It was the nation's renewed anxiety, after 17 people were killed at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High in February, that had drawn so many administrators to the National School Safety Conference at the Florida hotel, 200 miles north of Parkland.

Also there, hoping to capture some piece of the new spending, were 105 vendors, an all-time high for the expo and a 75 percent increase over the previous year.

“This is our first school conference that we’ve ever done,” said SAM Medical sales director Denise Ehlert, who, at one point that evening, knelt down and encouraged a 6-year-old girl to tighten a tourniquet on a woman’s arm as a way to demonstrate that anyone could do it.

“This is brand new. . . . This is our first show,” said Paul Noe, who had come to sell a high-tech, armored classroom door that, for the price of \$4,000, he claimed could stop bullets, identify the weapon, photograph the shooter and notify police. The bright yellow one they’d put on display had been shot 57 times.

“We just released it in the past couple of months to be available to schools, and we’ve been obviously overwhelmed with interest,” said Monte Scott, who sells guns that fire balls packed with a potent pepper mixture meant to disable a shooter. Scott had just returned from training U.S. troops in Afghanistan on how to use the weapons in a combat zone.

Echoing a frequent refrain at the expo, Justin Kuhn said his own children, not money, led him to found his company, which produces an elaborate door-security and weapons-detection system.

Although Kuhn, who had previously invented a scraper blade and a car wax, acknowledged he didn’t know whether his new product would have stopped the attack at Stoneman Douglas, he had still tried to leverage the bloodshed. Standing next to his company’s 2,500-pound aluminum-framed vestibule, he recalled a meeting in Indiana with one district’s head of school safety who had noted that the price tag for Kuhn’s entire system seemed steep.

“If you think \$500,000 is expensive, go down to Parkland, Florida, and tell 17 people \$500,000 is expensive. That’s \$29,000 a kid,” Kuhn recalled saying. “Every person would pay \$29,000 a kid to have their kid alive.”

By this spring, Huffman High in Birmingham, Ala., had, in security parlance, been “hardened,” a term that in recent years has migrated from anti-terrorism circles to school board meetings. Surveillance cameras were mounted inside and out, and Huffman’s 1,370 students were periodically checked for weapons, both with handheld and walk-through metal detectors, administrators say. Three resource officers patrolled the hallways.

But none of those measures saved the life of Courtlin Arrington, a senior who was about to leave school one afternoon in March when a boy showing off a handgun unintentionally fired it, sending a round through the girl’s chest two months before her graduation.

How the weapon got into Huffman remains unclear — Arrington’s family has sued the district, limiting what administrators can say — but the incident highlights a theme that appears throughout the survey responses: No amount of investment in security can guarantee a school protection from gun violence.

Much of what can be done to prevent harm is beyond any school’s control because, in a country with more guns — [nearly 400 million](#) — than people, children are at risk of being shot no matter where they are. A [2016 study](#) in the American Journal of Medicine found that, among high-income nations, 91 percent of children younger than 15 who were killed by gunfire lived in the United States.

But several administrators did point to specific steps that at least contained the attacks on their schools.

At Florida’s Forest High in April, for example, teachers and teens who had undergone safety training locked classroom doors and barricaded them with chairs and desks just seconds after realizing that a man with a shotgun was in the hallway. He fired through one door and wounded a student but surrendered shortly after failing to get inside.

A month later, at Dixon High in Illinois, resource officer Mark Dallas heard shots near the school gym, rushed toward the noise and in, an exchange of gunfire, struck the shooter, who was quickly arrested.

Seven of the 23 surveyed schools that had officers at the time of their shootings indicated that they played a direct role in limiting the harm done. Still, what Dallas did is exceedingly rare. The Post’s analysis identified just one other case over the past 19 years in which a resource

officer gunned down an active shooter. (To put that in perspective, at least seven shootings in the same period were halted by malfunctioning weapons or by the gunman's inability to handle them.)

While the mere presence of the officers may deter some gun violence, The Post found that, in dozens of cases, it didn't: Among the more than 225 incidents on campuses since 1999, at least 40 percent of the affected schools employed an officer.

Beyond armed security or any other particular safety measure, survey respondents emphasized that nothing was more important to minimizing the violence than preparation.

In November, staff at Rancho Tehama Elementary, a school in rural Northern California, heard what sounded like gunshots and hustled the children outside into the building. All students and staff had locked down, something they regularly practiced, 48 seconds after a secretary called for it — and just 10 seconds before a man with an AR-15-style rifle reached the quad. The gunman, who had already killed five people that day, fired more than 100 rounds, shattering glass and tearing holes in walls.

He tried to enter classrooms and the main office, but all were secured. Six minutes after arriving, he gave up and left, taking his own life a short time later. One student, age 6, was wounded but survived.

The school's security plan worked "flawlessly," wrote Superintendent Richard Fitzpatrick, but that didn't diminish the indignation he felt that his students and staff had suffered through the terror — and that so little had been to done ensure someone else couldn't attempt to do the same thing, there or at any other American school.

The attacker, who had been stripped of his guns by a judge, had built the weapons he used with parts, many of which are readily available online.

Without what Fitzpatrick called "sensible gun control ... We are largely powerless from determined shooters with high-capacity, high-velocity, semi-automatic assault rifles."

The idea for Jordan Goudreau's business came to him in Puerto Rico, where he had traveled to work in private security in the aftermath of Hurricane Maria. Goudreau, a U.S. Army combat veteran, was making lots of money on the island, he said, but the new opportunity was too enticing to pass up.



“I saw Parkland, and I was like, ‘Well, nobody’s really tackling this, so I want to fix this,’” Goudreau explained at the expo in Florida, where the state legislature had just committed more than a quarter-billion dollars to school safety.

The solution, Goudreau concluded, was to embed former Special Operations agents, posing as teachers, inside schools. He argued that the benefits over resource officers were obvious.

First, because the children wouldn’t know who his guys really are (or that they’re armed and adept at counterterrorism tactics), students would be more likely to open up, giving agents a chance to glean information that could expose a potential threat.

“He’s just a — he’s a cool shop teacher: ‘Hey, what’s up, fellas,’” said Goudreau, 42, envisioning a potential conversation with a child. “I go sit down with a kid who’s alone, playing ‘Dungeons and Dragons,’ and I just try to see whether there’s any problems.”

Second, Goudreau said, his men all thrive in combat and could quickly snipe a shooter.

“The beauty of it is it’s all for the price of a Netflix subscription, so it’s really hard to argue with me about, ‘Well, it costs too much.’ You can’t tell me that,” insisted Goudreau, hair buzzed and jaw square.

No schools had yet signed on for the program, and he still hadn’t worked out a number of the business plan’s precise details, but Goudreau was certain that he wanted to bill the parents of each student directly (for \$8.99 a month) so his staff could remain independent from any district’s “chain of command.”

When the media relations liaison standing beside him at their booth suggested that, if necessary, they could go through school boards and accept government money, Goudreau cut him off.

“But we don’t want to. We don’t want that,” he said. “We want private money, because it’s faster.”

Among the many challenges educators face in trying to protect their students from harm is determining what product, or person, to trust.

As [Home Depot](#) and [Walmart](#) market \$150 bulletproof backpacks to frightened parents, administrators are being inundated with pitches from entrepreneurs pushing new concepts that make grand promises. One superintendent who responded to the survey said that within

hours of a shooting earlier this year, her inbox was “flooded from vendors with some pretty disrespectful and tacky statements: ‘had you had this . . . ; if you had this . . .’”

The industry is also rife with self-appointed experts and consultants who claim to know what safety measures are most effective, but given that so little government or academic research has been done on what insulates students from on-campus gun violence, it’s enormously difficult for schools to reach conclusions based in fact.

“Decisions about whether to invest in school security technology for a school or school district are complex,” the Johns Hopkins study said. “Many choices about the technology selected, however, may be made with incomplete information or with information that is influenced more by political or reactionary consideration than by local conditions.”

For administrators at the expo, trying to understand which vendors were true authorities was especially tricky, in part because, like Goudreau, dozens had worked in other industries before pivoting to school security.

Joe Taylor, co-founder of Nightlock, created a residential door barricade 15 years ago after someone tried to break into his parents’ home. Back then, he never envisioned producing a version for classrooms. Now, schools make up 95 percent of his business.

As he explained that the company had made the transition after being bombarded with requests following the Sandy Hook shooting, a man approached his booth.

“I just bought about \$7,000 worth of these,” said Cas Gant, an assistant principal from a charter school in Panama City, Fla.

Taylor noted that, at one point, his devices were back-ordered nearly two months.

“Right after the Parkland shooting —” he said, pausing.

“A surge?” asked Gant’s wife, Desiree.

“There was a big surge,” he said. “But we’re finally caught up.”

“That’s good,” she said. “Anything to keep our babies safe.”





This is what the ALICE Training Institute describes as “counter.”

The drills have grown in popularity in recent years, and many schools, including some of those surveyed, have credited its conventional lockdown and evacuation training with saving the lives of students and staff. But numerous ALICE critics — including consultants, school psychologists, safety experts and parents — have argued that teaching children to physically confront gunmen, under any circumstances, is dangerous and irresponsible.

“What if the person is ex-military or the person has police training, and you’re teaching the student to throw a can of green beans or attack?” asked Joe E. Carter, vice president of business development and marketing at United Educators, an insurance company that covers more than 800 K-12 schools around the country. “I haven’t seen any data out there — real data — that this is something that makes it safer.”

Representatives from ALICE, which was founded by a former police officer, insist that the counter strategies should be used as a last resort and that schools are responsible for deciding what’s suitable for their students. Colleen Lerch, a marketing specialist at the company, said their instructors recommend “SWARM” techniques — in which kids may gang tackle shooters — only to students who are at least 13 or 14 years old.

“At this age, it is statistically very high that the shooter will be the same age as potential victims. A room full of 14 year olds can easily control another 14 year old,” Lerch asserted in an email to The Post, though she provided no evidence to support either claim.

In fact, a third of shooters who attack middle and high schools are older than their victims, according to a Post analysis. Also, while The Post found that adults who were not members of law enforcement have subdued more than a dozen school shooters over the past 19 years — including on at least three campuses that underwent ALICE training — the company could not point to a single case in which students used its counter techniques to take down a gunman.

On multiple occasions, however, students who have confronted armed attackers, whether on purpose or accidentally, have been killed or wounded. Last year, a 15-year-old boy was shot to death at Freeman High, just outside Spokane in rural Rockford, Wash., after he tried to stop an armed student in the hallway. Three months later, a 17-year-old was killed when he came upon a gunman in the bathroom who was readying an attack at Aztec High in New Mexico, and a 17-year-old girl was wounded when she did the same thing at Alpine High in Texas two years ago.



The service, which is free and will be adopted by more than 650 districts by January, has already produced meaningful results.

At the start of this school year, the organization said, a tipster informed the crisis center that a student who might have access to guns had talked about shooting gay classmates. Staff immediately contacted local law enforcement and school district leaders, who intervened. In another case, someone reported that an eighth-grade friend was cutting herself and considering suicide. Sandy Hook Promise said the girl is now receiving treatment.

The system and others like it address what several of the surveyed schools said was the only thing that could have stopped the shootings on their campuses: a tip from someone who knew it might happen.

No one at a South Carolina school knew that a former student would drive there and open fire on the playground two years ago, but afterward, the superintendent in Anderson County, Joanne Avery, fixated on finding another way to keep her kids safe.

Avery overhauled the school system's safety measures after the shooting, adding resource officers, increasing the number of active-shooter drills, installing trauma kits, updating surveillance systems and providing receptionists with panic buttons.

She changed one district practice, too.

The shooter, who was 14 at the time, had been expelled from a middle school in a neighboring district after making threats and bringing a hatchet in his bag. It was then, in his isolation as a home-schooler, that he became obsessed with mass murderers and planned his attack on [Townville Elementary](#).

So, early this year, when the principal at one of her schools asked to expel a student who'd talked on social media about bludgeoning classmates, Avery said no.

"I'm not just going to expel him and be done with him," she recalled telling the principal. "You're going to increase your chances of that person coming back to your school and doing harm."

Instead, Avery met with the sheriff's office, a prosecutor and the area's executive director for mental health.



“We’ve got to do something for these kind of kids,” she told them, and what they did was conduct a criminal investigation, charge the boy and set a court date.

She attended, and although the student’s mother argued that he should be released, Avery had told the prosecutor she wanted to make sure he got help. The judge listened, sending him to juvenile detention and ordering that he undergo a mental health evaluation and receive counseling.

Months later, at another hearing, the boy’s mother argued again that he should be released. Avery didn’t oppose that, but again, she asked that he continue to receive support. And again, the judge listened, sending the boy to an alternative school and ordering that he and his mother receive additional counseling. A probation officer was also assigned to check on him every week.

Avery doesn’t know whether the boy ever would have carried out his threats. But she witnessed the damage caused by 12 seconds of gunfire — a first-grader dead, survivors overcome with trauma, a community splintered — and she does know what her time and effort cost: nothing.



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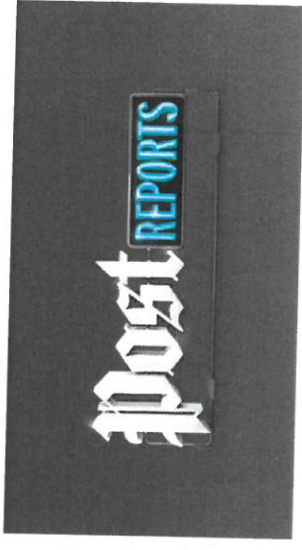
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