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

By John Woodrow Cox and

Steven Rich

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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.

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

What few of the salespeople could offer, however, was proof.

of 20 first-graders in Newtown, Conn., which prompted a surge of security spending by districts across the country this fall, The Washington Post sent surveys to every school in its database that had endured a shooting of some kind since the 2012 killings campus police officers — little research has been done on which safety measures do and do not protect students from gun violence. Earlier Although school security has grown into a \$2.7 billion market — an estimate that does not account for the billions more spent on armed

a group, have faced the full spectrum of campus gun violence: targeted, indiscriminate, accidental and self-inflicted learned — some brief but many rich in detail — provide valuable insight from administrators in urban, suburban and rural districts who, as Of the 79 schools contacted, 34 provided answers, including Sandy Hook Elementary. Their responses to questions about what they

often hear about threats before teachers do have done. Several, however, emphasized the critical importance of their staffs developing deep, trusting relationships with students, who When asked what, if anything, could have prevented the shootings at their schools, nearly half replied that there was nothing they could

place but still couldn't stop the incidents Only one school suggested that any kind of safety technology might have made a difference. Many had robust security plans already in

In 2016, Utah's Union Middle School had a surveillance system, external doors that could be accessed only with IDs and an armed the building just after classes ended policewoman, known as a resource officer, when a 14-year-old boy shot another student twice in the head during a confrontation outside

had armed guards at the entrance of the school, it would not have mattered. If we would have required students to have see-through "Even if we would have had metal detectors, it would not have mattered," wrote Jeffrey P. Haney, district spokesman. "If we would have backpacks and bags, it would not have mattered."

and conflicting evidence in the literature on the short- and long-term effectiveness of school safety technology." The survey responses are consistent with a federally funded 2016 study by Johns Hopkins University that concluded there was "limited 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.

Monte Scott, who sells guns that fire balls packed with a potent pepper mixture meant to disable a shooter. Scott had just returned from "We just released it in the past couple of months to be available to schools, and we've been obviously overwhelmed with interest," said 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 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 have stopped the attack at Stoneman Douglas, he had still tried to leverage the bloodshed. Standing next to his company's 2,500-pound Kuhn's entire system seemed steep.

recalled saying. "Every person would pay \$29,000 a kid to have their kid alive "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

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

showing off a handgun unintentionally fired it, sending a round through the girl's chest two months before her graduation 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

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

among high-income nations, 91 percent of children younger than 15 who were killed by gunfire lived in the United States 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, 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 —

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 and wounded a student but surrendered shortly after failing to get inside 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

exchange of gunfire, struck the shooter, who was quickly arrested 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

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 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 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.

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 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 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.

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 school's security plan worked "flawlessly," wrote Superintendent Richard Fitzpatrick, but that didn't diminish the indignation he felt 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

Without what Fitzpatrick called "sensible gun control ... We are largely powerless from determined shooters with high-capacity, highvelocity, 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

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

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

sit down with a kid who's alone, playing 'Dungeons and Dragons,' and I just try to see whether there's any problems." "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

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

can't tell me that," insisted Goudreau, hair buzzed and jaw square "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

district's "chain of command." 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 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

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

"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.

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

before, but this was her first As the men continued discussing the door lock, Desiree looked around, taking in the scene. Her husband had attended school safety expos

these vendors are here?" "This is sad. I came in here with my mouth wide open," she murmured. "Isn't it scary that we literally have to go through this — that all of

to him Carl Manna, an assistant principal at another Florida high school, felt the same way as he wandered the room, though none of this was new

to keep the gunman out. Months earlier, Manna had pretended to be an active shooter in a training video his school produced At one booth, he paused to stare at a photo from Forest High showing the desks and chairs that had been stacked to the classroom's ceiling

"That," he said, "is what the room looked like after I left."

wrapped with black tape The video opens with Manna, in jeans and a dark hoodie, stalking Branford High's hallways. In his right hand, he holds a water pistol

proper use of these five steps could save your life," he says, as the video illustrates a series of widely accepted approaches to staying safe in that teaches people how to respond to active shooters. The acronym stands for Alert, Lockdown, Inform, Counter and Evacuate. "The Manna, also the narrator, explains that the video would review "ALICE" training, a set of strategies developed by an Ohio-based company an active-shooter situation

and an Adobe Photoshop hardcover textbook Then, at the 2:13 mark, a plastic Germ-X hand sanitizer bottle appears on the screen, followed by a 20-ounce Mountain Dew, a travel mug

protect yourself. Every room is equipped with something that could distract and defend against the aggressor." "Once you have locked and barricaded the door, quickly move to an area out of sight," Manna says. "Grab several items you can use to

tackle the man to the floor directly beneath an American flag mounted to the wall When Manna walks in, he's bombarded with flying bottles, books and a backpack before the teenagers rush him. In the other video, kids Seconds later, the video shows Manna and a disguised administrator at another high school each entering classrooms, their guns raised. This is what the ALICE Training Institute describes as "counter."

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

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 attack?" asked Joe E. Carter, vice president of business development and marketing at United Educators, an insurance company that "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 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

"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 old's can easily control another 14 year old," Lerch asserted in an email to The Post, though she provided no evidence to support either claim.

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 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 used its counter techniques to take down a gunman.

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 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 On multiple occasions, however, students who have confronted armed attackers, whether on purpose or accidentally, have been killed or two years ago.

counter training but said he also suspected some parents would object if the kids weren't taught how to defend themselves Malcolm Hines, head of safety for the Florida district where Manna participated in the active-shooter video, understood criticisms of the

"This is an option for them to at least fight back," said Hines, whose district has paid ALICE more than \$7,500 since late last year

appears, then — without hesitation — several kids charge the intruder, easily bringing him to the ground before he fires a shot In numerous ALICE training videos online, the plan always works to perfection: Students pelt the faux shooter with objects the moment he

It's ludicrous, critics say, to think that children would behave with such decisiveness and precision if they were facing a real gunman

shooter with the book or rock, knock them down, etc.) again in a crisis situation, the ability to not accidentally hurt a classmate, the reality that unsuccessfully going on the attack might make that student a more likely target of the shooter." from a frightened kid to an attacker in the moment of crisis, the ability to successfully execute the attack on the shooter (e.g., hit the for the National Association of School Psychologists, wrote in a statement to The Post. "It presumes an ability to transform psychologically "There is no research/evidence . . . that teaching students to attack a shooter is either effective or safe," Katherine C. Cowan, spokeswoman

Nicole Hockley, whose 6-year-old son, Dylan, was killed at Sandy Hook Elementary in 2012, concluded long ago that much of America looks at school safety the wrong way

in the first place." "It's so much focus on imminent danger and what you do in the moment," she said, "as opposed to what you do to stop it from happening

the Say Something Anonymous Reporting System, which allows users to privately submit safety concerns through a computer, phone or difference, but she knows that there are other, perhaps more attainable, ways to prevent harm, too. In March, her organization launched Hockley and her colleagues at Sandy Hook Promise, a nonprofit she co-founded, have argued that reforming gun laws would make a

that the anonymity should alleviate encouraged students to speak up if they're aware of a potential threat. Often, though, kids said that they feared repercussions, a concern Because many, if not most, shooters offer some indication of their intentions through comments to friends or online, Hockley has for years 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 another case, someone reported that an eighth-grade friend was cutting herself and considering suicide. Sandy Hook Promise said the girl talked about shooting gay classmates. Staff immediately contacted local law enforcement and school district leaders, who intervened. In 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.

and set a court date "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

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

mother receive additional counseling. A probation officer was also assigned to check on him every week. that he continue to receive support. And again, the judge listened, sending the boy to an alternative school and ordering that he and his 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

nothing. 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



John Woodrow Cox

New Hampshire. Follow > John Woodrow Cox is an enterprise reporter at The Washington Post. He previously worked at the Tampa Bay Times and at the Valley News in



Steven Rich

National Security Agency, police shootings, tax liens and civil forfeiture. He was a reporter on two teams to win Pulitzer Prizes, for public service in 2014 and national reporting in 2016. Follow Steven Rich is the database editor for investigations at The Washington Post, While at The Post, he has worked on investigations involving the

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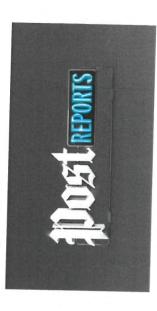
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