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Navigating Fear and Resilience: Educators' Perspectives on School Shootings

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explored the lived experiences of educators in secondary school settings in an era of traumatic school shootings. We interviewed nine educators across the United States who have indirectly experienced school shootings (e.g., heard about a school shooting through media reports or shared experiences from friends or other educators). Participants reflected on how these reports impact their jobs, the challenges they face, and the support they receive in their schools. We discovered six overarching themes from our research, including 1) autonomic arousal, 2) the impact of school climate on feeling safe, 3) preparation and its side effects, 4) collective stress, 5) the need for understanding and collaborative action, and 6) educator resiliency. We then integrated these findings with SAMHSA's trauma-informed framework to deepen the understanding of secondary trauma on educators. We conclude with a review of implications for practicing school counselors, school leadership, and other support personnel, and offer guidance on how they can mitigate negative impacts on school climate.

Keywords: school shootings, trauma-informed schools, educator support, phenomenological study, SAMHSA

Gun violence in U.S. schools has become one of the most urgent public health and educational crises of our time, shaping the daily realities of students, educators, and administrators alike. Between 2004 and 2024, the number of individuals wounded or killed in school shootings rose by an alarming 715% (Reidman, 2025), underscoring both the persistence and escalation of this epidemic. Even for those not directly exposed, the threat remains omnipresent through media coverage, heightened security measures, and routine safety drills, embedding a culture of vigilance and fear within

school communities. Professional school counselors and leaders are on the front lines of responding to this trauma, tasked with maintaining safe, supportive environments while addressing students' academic and emotional needs (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2022). However, the rising frequency of school shootings, combined with an unprecedented teacher shortage, raises urgent questions about how this climate of violence may be affecting educator well-being and attrition (Sandy Hook Promise, n.d.; Wentworth et al., 2024). Despite educators' central role, their voices are often underrepresented in research and policy conversations. This qualitative study seeks to understand their experiences with school shootings to inform more effective and comprehensive support strategies.

Gun Violence in Schools

Gun violence is considered a public health crisis due to its prevalence and devastating consequences (Rapa et al., 2024). As of 2019, gun injury became the leading cause of death for children ages 0-19. School shootings represent a significant component of gun violence in the United States, with their frequency reaching the highest levels ever recorded. This issue affects the United States far more frequently and severely than other countries; the United States experiences 57 times as many school shootings as other industrialized countries. The prevalence of this form of gun violence has wide-ranging impacts, which are poorly understood (Varela et al., 2019). Since the 1999 Columbine school shooting, 338,000 students have been impacted by gun violence at school (Sandy Hook Promise, n.d.). In 2022 alone, there were 46 school shootings, averaging nearly four incidents per month with 34 students and educators killed by gun violence at school. These shootings directly impacted 43,000 students and hundreds of thousands more indirectly.

Secondary Traumatic Stress

Secondary Traumatic Stress (STS) is a term that refers to the impact of hearing about a traumatic experience that has happened to someone else (Figley, 1995). The symptoms of STS are almost identical to those of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) as defined in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5-TR); however, the exposure in STS is secondary (APA, 2022). There are four symptom clusters in STS: intrusion, avoidance, arousal, and mood distortions. Examples of intrusion symptoms include distressing dreams, disturbing thoughts and images related to the trauma, and dissociative reactions, including numbing. Avoidance symptoms include avoiding both internal and external reminders of the trauma, including specific locations and people, along with thoughts and memories. Arousal symptoms include difficulty concentrating, exaggerated startle response, and irritability. Mood symptoms include difficulty experiencing positive feelings and self-blame. The onset of STS can be sudden. Compassion fatigue (CF) is a closely related construct, conceptualized as a combination of burnout and STS (Stamm, 2010). Vicarious traumatization (VT) is also associated with STS and CF. VT refers to how an individual's worldview is affected by prolonged exposure to others' suffering and trauma (McCann & Pearlman, 1990). There is no clear consensus in the

literature on how to define or distinguish these terms, as their symptomology overlaps, so they are often studied together (Craig & Sprang, 2010; Kim et al., 2022). Despite the overlap in these terms, STS is the most comprehensive construct for understanding the potentially harmful impact of secondary trauma exposure and, therefore, the term we will use throughout this manuscript (Wall, 2024).

The Impact on Educators

Statistics related to gun violence highlight school shootings as a significant public health issue in the United States; however, scant data explain how this form of violence affects educators (e.g., their self-efficacy, career trajectory, and mental health; Wender & DeMille, 2019; Yang et al., 2021). Much of the existing research explores how school shootings impact students (e.g., increased fear of attending school, difficulty learning, decreased academic performance, and increased risk of PTSD, suicide, and substance abuse; Green, 2020; Yang et al., 2021). One recent study shows that teacher STS can impair functioning, making them less effective (Sprang et al., 2025). Instruction and a positive school climate for students do not exist without educators; their well-being and job satisfaction are crucial elements of our education system (Watson & Astor, 2025). Therefore, we need to understand their experiences related to gun violence in schools to close the gap in the literature regarding this topic (Lee, 2013).

There is evidence that teachers experience symptoms of STS as a result of exposure to their students' trauma (Simon et al., 2022). In response to this type of secondary exposure, educators have reported difficulty sleeping, physical pain, low energy/motivation, worry, and feelings related to a lack of agency (Wall, 2024). The existing literature on this topic focuses on teachers' exposure to their students' trauma (Phelps et al., 2025; Simon et al., 2022; Wall, 2024). There is less data on the STS that teachers experience as a result of school shooting reports. Although momentum is building for developing more trauma-informed schools, there is a lack of awareness of the symptoms of STS among educators and the detrimental impacts these conditions can have on health and well-being (Walker, 2019). Beyond the secondary trauma that educators experience professionally, every teacher has their own personal context, which could include their own trauma history. A personal trauma history is associated with greater vulnerability to developing symptoms related to STS among mental health professionals and secondary trauma exposure from their clients (Leung et al., 2023). Additional research is needed in this area to prevent and treat STS, thereby strengthening protective factors that support teachers.

The proliferation of school violence in the United States corresponds with an ongoing nationwide teacher shortage (Teachers of Tomorrow, 2024). Florida has the highest vacancy rate in the United States, with over 5,000 teaching positions currently open. Literature also shows that between 40% and 50% of teachers leave the profession within their first five years of teaching, and almost 10% leave within their first year (Zhang & Zeller, 2016). Furthermore, the United States is not alone; teacher shortages are a global issue (Amitai & Houtte, 2022). This disturbing educator shortage has been partially attributed to low wages, inadequate resources, and

stressful working conditions. The threat of school shootings is an extreme, yet tangible, example of these demanding workplace elements.

According to limited data, safety concerns are cited as a reason educators are leaving the profession (Wentworth et al., 2024). Since secondary exposure to reports of school shootings can cause detrimental health effects, educators could also be negatively impacted by hearing about or witnessing these incidents (Fallahi & Lesik, 2009). With little data on this topic, developing a better understanding of teacher shortages and the relationships with school shootings needs to be explored. In an attempt to help educators feel more prepared, many school districts implement armed assailant trainings (Best Practice Considerations for Armed Assailant Drills in Schools, n.d.). These trainings remain a subject of debate, as research questioning their effectiveness and concerns about potential harm to both educators and students have been raised (Advant et al., 2026). Preliminary data on the psychological impact of these drills on educators suggest they do not enhance educators' sense of safety (Advant et al., 2026). It is recommended that mental health professionals be on-site during all stages of these drills to help educators and students emotionally prepare for and process the experience, thereby mitigating emotional harm (Best Practice Considerations for Armed Assailant Drills in Schools, n.d.).

The School Environment

Due to the pervasive need for safety and security among students and teachers, the United States, along with many other countries, has recently emphasized the concept of trauma-informed schools (Watson & Astor, 2025). In a trauma-informed school, all community members understand trauma, focus on creating a secure environment, take a strengths-based approach, and engage in collaborative relationships. By adopting a universal approach, staff can avoid the need to identify individuals with traumatic backgrounds, instead considering that feeling physically and psychologically safe is beneficial for everyone.

This approach contributes to a favorable school climate, which numerous studies have demonstrated to be a crucial factor in the overall well-being of both students and staff (Aldridge & McChesney, 2018; Lin & Guo, 2024; Lombardi et al., 2019; Obeidat et al., 2024; Watson & Astor, 2025; Whitlock et al., 2014). Obeidat and colleagues (2024) encourage several initiatives to promote a positive school climate, including fostering strong relationships, practicing inclusive decision-making with students, integrating social-emotional learning, and collaborating with both community stakeholders and other disciplines. For these practices to be effective, the entire community must believe in their systemic effectiveness (L'Estrange & Bentley, 2025). School counselors and administrators can model and encourage the trauma-informed initiative, thereby helping to create the desired school climate for students, staff, families, and community members.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study is grounded in the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's (SAMHSA) framework for a trauma-informed approach, which

moves beyond simple awareness to fundamentally change an organization's culture and actions (Flatow et al., 2015). Central to this framework is the definition of trauma through the Three Es: the Event, the Experience, and the Effects.

1. The Event: Traumatic events may include a single occurrence or a series of circumstances that involve an actual or extreme threat of physical or psychological harm. In the context of this study, reports of school shootings represent these threatening events.
2. The Experience: An individual's experience of an event determines whether it is traumatic. This is shaped by how the individual labels the event, assigns meaning to it, and is physically or psychologically disrupted by it. Because traumatic events often involve a power differential, the experience is often framed by feelings of powerlessness.
3. The Effects: The lasting adverse effects of trauma may occur immediately or have a delayed onset. These effects can impair an individual's ability to cope with daily stress, maintain trusting relationships, and manage cognitive processes such as memory, emotion, and attention.

By understanding these Three Es, organizations can better implement the Four Rs of a trauma-informed approach. This requires a system that realizes the widespread impact of trauma, recognizes signs and symptoms in both students and staff, responds by integrating this knowledge into all policies and procedures, and actively seeks to resist re-traumatization.

Furthermore, the implementation of this approach is guided by six key principles: (1) Safety, (2) Trustworthiness and Transparency, (3) Peer Support, (4) Collaboration and Mutuality, (5) Empowerment, Voice, and Choice, and (6) Cultural, Historical, and Gender Issues (Flatow et al., 2015). For educators, the principles of collaboration and mutuality are particularly vital, as they involve leveling power differences between staff and administrators to ensure that healing and safety occur within meaningful relationships.

Role of the School Counselor

School counselors are uniquely positioned to support students and staff by addressing mental health needs and fostering a safe, supportive school environment (Ellington et al., 2023). Because school counselors often work with the same students over multiple years, they establish rapport that enables them to recognize behavioral changes, identify concerns, and collaborate closely with teachers who interact with these students daily.

In many districts, school counselors may be the only professionals with mental health training in both the school and the community (Ellington et al., 2023). This expertise not only enables them to intervene in student situations but also to guide and support teachers as they navigate behavioral or social interactions in the classroom. School counselors help teachers understand students and implement supportive strategies, making them essential partners in preventing crises and maintaining a healthy school climate.

ASCA (2019) emphasizes that school counselors play a critical role in strengthening teacher-student relationships, which are foundational to crisis prevention. By serving as a communication bridge, school counselors can foster trust, help resolve misunderstandings, and ensure that both students and staff feel supported. The practice of rapport building by school counselors was a protective factor in at least one resolved school hostage situation (Daniels et al., 2007), and strong school counselor-staff-student relationships were reported as vital before, during, and after a school shooting (Brown, 2018).

Collectively, these findings highlight that school counselors are not only a source of support for students but also essential for teachers. They help staff to feel prepared, informed, and connected as they work to maintain safe and supportive school environments.

Influence of Building Leadership

Efforts to build safe and stable relationships can serve as protective factors before, during, and after a tragedy (ASCA, 2022). Feeling supported by administration can also increase feelings of safety and contribute to these protective factors (Gregersen, 2021; Sprang et al., 2025). Understanding the issues staff confront daily is essential to building relationships with them. By possessing this knowledge, leaders can enhance their support, foster stronger relationships, and contribute to a safer school environment. This study seeks to examine educators' perceptions and lived experiences as they navigate the persistent threat and ongoing reports of school shootings. By understanding how educators internalize these events, the research aims to identify ways to ensure that teachers feel prepared, connected, and supported in an era of increasing school violence.

METHODS

We used a qualitative phenomenological design in this study to explore the lived experiences of educators indirectly exposed to school shootings. We chose this method to gain a deeper understanding of participants' perspectives (Creswell, 2013). Considering that school shootings are traumatic events with attendant personal and professional impacts, the phenomenological approach enabled us to explore the depth of subjective lived experiences of educators. Phenomenology explores how individuals construct meaning in response to significant life events (Creswell, 2013). In this study, we explored how participants make meaning from reports of school shootings.

The research question for this study was: What are the lived experiences of educators who have indirectly experienced school shootings?

Researcher Positionality

The first three authors comprised our research team. At the time of this study, we were all third-year doctoral candidates in a CACREP-accredited program in counselor education and supervision. We have all completed advanced qualitative research courses. We are also parents with children in various school settings.

Our first author and lead researcher is a white, middle-aged Christian woman who lives in a middle-class suburb of Dallas/Fort Worth and has previously lived in the Midwest and New England. She worked as a secondary school counselor for fifteen years and is a licensed professional counselor (LPC) in the state of Texas. Her private practice specializes in working with adolescents, educators, and parents. She is also the mother of three children: one in middle school and two in college. Her research centers on improving support systems and collaboration between schools and stakeholders. Apart from the final author, the primary researcher was the only member of the research team with direct experience working in a school setting and navigating school crises. Given her professional background, she acknowledges her views on school violence prevention, including the desire for increased mental health support for students, staff training in trauma-informed care, and fostering strong relationships to create a safe school environment.

The study's second author is a white, middle-aged woman who lives in a mixed-faith Christian-Jewish home in Jacksonville, FL. She has lived in various regions of the United States, including the Midwest, New England, and the Pacific Northwest. She is a licensed mental health counselor (LMHC) and qualified supervisor (QS) in Florida, an LMHC in Washington, and an LPC in Oregon. She is an EMDR-certified clinician in private practice, specializing in the treatment of trauma and related disorders. Like the first author, she has three children: one in elementary school, one in middle school, and one in high school. She has worked in the mental health field since 2009 across various clinical settings, but does not have direct experience in schools. Her research broadly focuses on trauma. As a parent, the second researcher acknowledges that reports of school shootings have negatively impacted her emotionally.

The study's third author identifies as a Black, Ghanaian-heritage man and a naturalized U.S. citizen, whose social location is shaped by his experiences as an African immigrant navigating both Ghanaian cultural traditions and the sociocultural landscape of the United States. He is a certified professional counselor in Nevada, works in private practice, and has been in the mental health field since 2022. He also has over a decade of experience in pastoral ministry and currently leads spiritual and clinical care initiatives in multicultural, post-traumatic settings in Trinidad and Tobago. He is the father of three elementary-aged children. Although he has no direct experience working in schools or with school shootings, he is concerned about the impact of school shootings.

The final author served as the auditor to verify the research conducted by the other authors. She is a white, middle-aged Christian woman who lives in a middle-class suburb of Virginia Beach, Virginia. She has previously lived in many different areas of the United States. She works as a counselor educator and is currently a licensed professional counselor (LPC) in Virginia. Her private practice specializes in working with military and military-affiliated children, individuals, and families. She is also the mother of six children: three adults and three high school to college-aged. While she did not actively create the themes, she verified their consistency with the participants' voices. Her vocation as a school counselor educator suited her well for this position on the team.

We collaboratively analyzed and interpreted the data to enhance our understanding of participants' lived experiences related to the impact of school shootings. To strengthen the trustworthiness of our findings, we engaged in continuous reflexivity using reflective journaling, which helped us identify and mitigate potential biases throughout the research process. Additionally, we employed analyst triangulation: interviews with participants who had prior relationships with team members were independently coded and analyzed by researchers with no personal connection to these respondents. This approach ensured greater objectivity, minimized bias, and significantly enhanced the credibility and reliability of our interpretations.

Recruitment Process

After receiving approval from the Human Subjects Review Committee, we employed multiple recruitment strategies to promote participation. We sent email invitations and text messages to personal and professional contacts seeking participants. We also posted on social media to invite interested K-12 educators. After nine interviews, no additional themes were identified, indicating data saturation and strengthening confidence in the trustworthiness of the findings. Guest et al. (2006) stated that saturation can often be achieved with a relatively small sample size, particularly in phenomenological research that emphasizes the detailed and in-depth exploration of lived experiences. Similarly, Vasileiou et al. (2018) noted that smaller sample sizes are often sufficient to achieve saturation in qualitative studies, particularly when the focus is on in-depth analysis.

Participants

We utilized purposive and snowball sampling to recruit participants for this study, specifically K-12 educators who had exposure to school shootings. The inclusion criteria encompassed educators who had directly experienced a school shooting or had learned about one through media reports, colleagues, or shared experiences. To ensure inclusive representation, the study recruited participants from diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds, as well as those who teach in public, private, or charter schools.

We interviewed nine participants for this study. Participants were from various states, including Nevada (2), Texas (1), Florida (3), and Massachusetts (3). The participants ranged in age from 36 to 53 years old. They had at least 11 years of experience as educators, with six of the nine having over 20 years; they currently teach in middle school (5) and high school (4) settings. Six females and three males participated, with two identifying as Black and the remaining seven identifying as White. Seven participants have completed a Master’s degree, and two indicated a bachelor’s degree was their highest level of education.

Data Collection

Participants completed a Google Form to verify their eligibility and to collect general demographic information. They then signed an informed consent form detailing their rights and the study’s confidential measures.

The research involved semi-structured Zoom interviews, lasting between 30 and 60 minutes. Open-ended questions explored the educators' experiences with school shootings, their motivation for teaching, and their experience as educators. The interview questions included: (1) Can you tell me about the educational setting in which you work? (2) How do you feel about being an educator? (3) How did you choose this profession? (4) What are some of your most memorable experiences as a teacher, both positive and negative? (5) What is the most recent report of a school shooting that you remember hearing, and what thoughts surfaced when you heard it? (6) How have your reactions changed since the first time you heard a report to now, if at all? (7) What concerns, if any, do you have about a shooting occurring at your school? (8) How do reports of shootings, specifically, impact your experience as an educator? (9) How have school shooting reports changed your daily behavior or routines as an educator? (10) How do you feel about the general safety of yourself and your students? (11) Is there anything that could be done to help you feel safer? (12) Is there anything you would like to add about the impact of reports on school shootings?

Data Analysis

We transcribed the interviews using Otter.ai and sent the transcripts to each interviewee for review, requesting that they make any necessary corrections to ensure the accuracy of their lived experiences. One participant added a couple of thoughts that occurred to her after the initial interview regarding her general feelings of safety. These additional thoughts aligned with those from other interviews, so we incorporated them into the analysis. This member checking exemplifies our fidelity to the phenomenological research process and our attempt to strengthen data reliability.

We anonymized the verified transcriptions and began coding them. We copied the transcripts into a shared Google document and labeled them with the interviewee's initials to protect their identity. We used inductive coding, allowing codes to emerge from the data rather than relying on pre-established codes from previous research. Each researcher coded six interviews individually using the comment function in the Google document. Two team members coded each interview. One of the team members was the researcher who conducted the interview to capture any nuances that may have arisen during the conversation. We added a second coder to help minimize bias and provide triangulation by looking at it from a different perspective.

Once all the individual coding was complete, the research team met in dyads to conduct comparison coding. In this process, researchers discussed their coding and worked toward a consensus on the final codes for each interview to ensure checks and balances against biases and positionality. If any discrepancies arose in the interpretation of codes, we noted them to bring them back to the larger group for discussion. We continually returned to the research question to ensure the coding remained focused on the research topic.

After the consensus coding process, the entire research team came together to discuss the categories that emerged from the data and any remaining questions or discrepancies. Through group deliberation and discussion, we identified 29 categories

from all codes. During this coding process, we identified overlaps and connections among categories, which led us to consolidate them into six prominent themes based on the data. Table 1 presents the 29 categories consolidated into six final themes.

Table 1: Coding Process from Categories to Final Themes

Categories	Evolving themes	Final themes
Advocacy Lack of trust/appreciation/respect for educators Role of administration	Advocacy/awareness	The need for understanding and collaborative action
Effects of COVID Government policy Social media Societal stress	External factors	Collective stress
Motivation for teaching Relationships with students Teacher impact on students	Teacher resiliency	Educator resiliency
Personal experience Specific shootings that educators reference Volume/frequency of shootings	Individual context	
Feelings of safety Resource allocation Response to safety measures Safety concern Safety procedures	Overall safety	The impact of school climate on feeling safe
Alternate roles Controlling the controllables Desensitization Emotional responses Increased vigilance Profiling	Response to reports	Autonomic arousal

Preparation Perfunctory actions Social/emotional deficit	Preparation	Preparation and its side effects

To enhance the study's trustworthiness, we submitted our audit trail to an experienced qualitative researcher for external review and evaluation. The audit trail documented the procedures followed throughout the project, including recruitment emails, interview dates, and detailed records of meetings where data were analyzed and coded. This external review helped ensure transparency, confirmability, and rigor in the research process.

FINDINGS

While no participants had directly experienced a school shooting, everyone had a personal story. For example, Tony, who has taught for over twenty years, recounted two close encounters: "[My wife's] psychology teacher was shot at her high school. And then the year after I graduated from my high school, a student was shot and killed in the cafeteria." Other participants reported bomb threats and hit lists that, while never carried out, nonetheless heightened fear and disrupted the school environment. Most participants (7 out of 9) referenced Columbine as the most notable shooting and occasionally recalled others (i.e., Sandy Hook, Marjory Stoneman Douglas, and Virginia Tech). Misty, a high school English teacher, shared, "I don't even remember what it was. Because there have been so many." Through analysis, these recollections were consolidated into six major themes: 1) autonomic arousal, 2) the impact of school climate on feeling safe, 3) preparation and its side effects, 4) collective stress, 5) the need for understanding and collaborative action, and 6) educator resiliency.

Theme 1: Autonomic Arousal

The participants in this study initially exhibited various forms of autonomic arousal. Some of these autonomic responses were emotional, and others were physical actions that protected participants and their students. The emotional reactions ranged from avoidance, "I just stopped wanting to know more," to hope, "This is going to be the time that changes it. This is going to make a difference," to confusion, "Why? How could it happen? Did it have to come down to that? What were the signs?" Desensitization and numbing, which we conceptualize as forms of hypoarousal, were mentioned 18 times throughout the interviews. Misty responded, "I'm almost numb to it." Keith, a high school teacher in Massachusetts, referred to the reports as "white noise."

Educators often thought of their own families when hearing about school shootings. Some of them considered the possibility that it could happen to them or their kids. Misty shared:

> I just hugged my daughters a little bit closer. And I remember that morning after when they were on the bus going to school. I cried a little bit because I was thinking there are some parents who aren't able to put their young kids on a bus right now. And what if today is the last time I see them?

Participants noticed that some of their behavior had changed after hearing these reports. This sympathetic mobilization enabled teachers to protect themselves and their students in response to perceived threats to their safety. Control was an important concept. Christina, a teacher in a private middle school with over twenty years of experience, shared, "I wouldn't have the control, but I would, in a sense. I would be in charge of my room, and I would know what I could do to protect my students." Many of them noticed they became more vigilant about their surroundings and their students' locations at all times.

Vigilance is another form of hyperarousal. Gina, a 7th-grade teacher with over 20 years of experience, shared, "It's just being more aware and more cognizant; I don't know, it's just being tuned into your surroundings." Tony expressed, "Teachers are probably more mindful of where their students are now."

Finally, some participants noticed a heightened awareness of student behavior. They wondered who might become a school shooter. "There have been times when I've looked at a student, I've been like, if anybody's going to do anything, it's going to be that kid," admitted Tony. The initial emotional responses evolved into this awareness, perpetuating thoughts about what could happen. These thoughts were either strengthened or mitigated by the safety of the surrounding environment, which leads to the next theme: school climate.

Theme 2: The Impact of School Climate on Feeling Safe

When discussing overall feelings of safety, educators had a range of responses. Most felt safe in their environments, including Keith, "I feel safe. I think most of the kids feel safe now if anything was to occur." Some discussed that although they sometimes are fearful about the possibility of a school shooting, they do not dwell on it. Rachel shared, "I think that I feel threatened, but it's not enough to prevent me from doing my job." Tracy is considering early retirement due to feeling unsafe, supporting the idea that the persistent threat of violence in schools plays a role in teacher shortages.

Some participants mentioned procedures that made them feel safer on their campuses (e.g., the presence of school resource officers, cameras, alert bracelets, and check-in procedures). Some educators suggested measures that could be implemented around the campus to enhance safety. Matthew, an experienced private middle school teacher, recommended, "It would be nice if we had a fence around the campus."

Not everyone felt positively about the safety procedures. Tony argued that "hardening schools, that actually makes me feel less safe." Rachel felt it was impossible to be completely safe: "I don't really think we could ever put something in place that will account for all of the variables that we can account for." Matthew felt that little could be done: "You can't stop a school shooting if the person really wants to do it." Rachel also expressed frustration surrounding resource allocation:

"And I don't always have the answers because, like I said, we don't have all of the resources in place."

Educators with resources felt safer and more supported than those without them. This was particularly evident with the building leadership. If administrators were supportive, the educators felt safe. Gina expressed her feelings about having supportive leaders in her building:

> It's wonderful being in a place where, you know, they encourage you…if you see something that could be improved or whatever, that you are encouraged to say something about it and to do something about it, and that you feel supported in that.

When educators did not feel supported, they felt less safe. Misty confirmed this by sharing about her hesitancy to intervene in violent situations, "I don't put myself in that position. Because there have been so many teachers here at the school who have gotten hurt and haven't been supported by the administration."

Educators needed to know that the building's leaders were committed to their safety and success, as well as those of the students. Although many schools implemented safety measures to protect students, educators did not always feel that their own experiences and needs were acknowledged in decision-making. Administrators often focus on what students need to feel secure, but give less attention to what teachers need to feel prepared and protected. The perceived effectiveness of these safety measures depended on the intention behind them and on whether the leaders considered the well-being of both students and staff. We will look deeper into this with the third theme.

Theme 3: Preparation and Its Side Effects

The educators referred to training and had varying perspectives on its usefulness, with some feeling that they did not receive enough preparation or support to cope with its intensity. Misty shared an experience that she had:

> Teachers were practicing, but there were also officers from the state police force that had practice guns, and they were reenacting what a shooter would do. But they didn't necessarily prepare the teachers for just how intense they would be.

Some teachers felt that the schools were merely training and implementing safety measures to check a box, rather than making schools safer. Tracy, a high school English teacher, shared, "We're checking the things that the state requires us to check boxes on. But we kind of start falling short on the things that really mean something." Rachel expressed concerns about a misguided focus on where the threat may come from, "So that's what concerns me, is because we look at a shooter as somebody that's not in the school, and majority of the time they are in the school."

Regardless of the training they received, every interviewee visualized what they would do in the event of a shooting on their campus; some had even arranged the furniture in a specific way to minimize the impact. Gina responded, "I literally have

had nights of insomnia where I like, I plan like, Okay, if this happens, this is how we're gonna go. And if this happens, this is how it's gonna be handled." Rachel, a middle school teacher, discussed the classroom setup, saying, "So my grade level and I got on to Amazon, and we started looking for ways to barricade the door."

Many participants commented on a social and emotional deficit among the students. They felt that it had worsened significantly and needed to be addressed more effectively. Rachel shared, "You see it every day…how poorly the kids interact with each other. They're vicious. And it's horrible." She continued by talking about what she felt was the root of the issue:

> We tried to focus on it during COVID. I thought we did a beautiful job doing social-emotional awareness and talking about self-care…and it was beautiful. And that's the only time I've ever seen that. And now that we're out of that pandemic, you don't really see those things in place.

Some teachers have taken it upon themselves to create relationships with students as a form of prevention. Christina recalled:

> Making sure that your students know you. And that you really know them. That there's like a comfort level of, like, they can come to you. They know that, like, they need to listen to what you've conveyed. Okay, if she's telling us something important, we're really gonna listen because of the relationship we have.

These efforts at relationship building were important topics for teachers, as they realized that students lacked social-emotional awareness and a sense of belonging. In addition to any individual stress or traumas they were experiencing, teachers recognized that students had collectively experienced some stressful events in previous years. They could also empathize with some of this stress as they had experienced it themselves.

Theme 4: Collective Stress

Participants identified several factors they felt were beyond both their control and the school's. These factors affected how they experienced school shooting reports and were considered when approaching how they thought about the potential threat of a shooting occurring at their schools. The first factor was how COVID has affected the students' social and emotional development. Matthew expressed this by stating, "It's a crucial time of life to learn how to socialize with people…and all that is lacking, we could see it with all these kids." He felt the lack of social-emotional education during COVID weakened the skills needed to develop relationships and responsibility, "It's less about their academic knowledge base. It's about social-emotional. Those skills are where you really see the deficit and responsibilities of getting stuff turned in and done on time. They're really confused about routines." Keith added that he felt access to social media and societal stress, in general, impacted students' abilities to relate to each other: "Social media and the Internet is ruining

society." He went on to say, "Kids are going through a lot. I think society is going through a lot right now."

In addition to the factors directly affecting student development, educators were concerned about the impact of governmental policies. These policies impacted some teachers' perspectives on school shootings and their feelings of safety. Several participants expressed frustration with gun laws, including Tony, "We as a country have, you know, have settled for this. We've put people's rights to own guns above our students' rights to be safe at school and my right to be safe at work." Rachel mentioned the need for a stronger focus on mental health support:

> People always say we need to change the gun laws. But you're putting guns in the hands of people that aren't mentally stable. So you have to attack the issue at the root and get better mental care and put more people in the schools.

Regardless of the reason behind it, some felt strongly that access to guns is a significant issue impacting how they think about the potential threat of a school shooting:

> I think there is a gun problem in this country in general, I mean, that the statistics, at least the ones that are allowed to be collected, speak very highly to that. Gun violence is becoming one of the biggest killers of the age group that I work with (Tony).

The educators realized the impact some of these issues were having on the students and the school community as a whole. Many of them suggested ways to address the issues. They emphasized the importance of all stakeholders, including students, working together and supporting each other.

Theme 5: The Need for Understanding and Collaborative Action

In addition to the previously mentioned challenges, several teachers reported a lack of appreciation and respect, which makes their work more difficult. Rachel shared, "The most challenging part about my job here lately is the parent. I'm in a more affluent area. And so the aggressive nature to me has been alarming." Matthew stated, "We're expected to…protect them [the students] to the point where we'd sacrifice our own life to save theirs," and Tracy stated, "There used to be a bigger level of respect." The participants expressed that it is difficult for those not in a school environment to understand what it is like. Preparing for a school shooting is just one of their many duties, and teachers have accepted this as part of their job description. The lack of empathy is challenging, and the lack of respect and understanding can lead to burnout.

In response to this lack of awareness, many educators emphasized the importance of collaboration to achieve a common goal. Tonya, an experienced middle school teacher, suggests that "everybody needs to come together for the safety of our children." This applies to parents and the community advocating to those who make decisions. She also suggested that people get involved by attending board meetings.

Tony feels that the students' voices should be heard and given greater importance. This also encompasses better communication and cooperation with the school policy. Rachel expressed this by sharing that schools should be "making sure every parent knows when you come to this building, you need to go through the office, because usually, that's where you will have to go through the most doors."

Participants expressed concerns about the school environment and offered suggestions for addressing them. They consistently emphasized the importance of relationships and collaboration across all themes. Teachers recognized that connection and understanding were necessary not only because of their impact on students but also because these relationships improved their own outlook.

Theme 6: Resiliency of Educators

Despite the daily challenges that educators face and the lingering threat of potential school shootings, every participant in this study spoke at length about the positives of being an educator. The focus of this study was the impact of school shootings, and every participant spoke far more about the reasons they keep coming back. They each had individual teaching motivations, which were referenced more than 40 times in just nine interviews. Christian spoke about "the light behind the eyes when you know, when something clicks, and it doesn't have to be, you know, something major, just, you know, celebrating the little milestones, or the moments," or "they finally get the problem, or they can write the paragraph." Tonya expressed, "One of my favorite moments is, you know, when they finally understand." Many of the teachers argued that "the highlights outweigh the low lights."

Every educator in this study discussed the relationships they form with students and the satisfaction of seeing the impact they can have on students. Relationships with students and their lasting impact were mentioned more than 50 times across the interviews. Numerous statements referred to this concept. Keith and Matthew acknowledged that "the most rewarding part of teaching is the connections," and Christian shared, "I love the interactions; I love watching the growth." When asked how she feels about being an educator, Misty responded, "I love making an impact on students. And I feel that in my classroom, I love my job." Teachers also found value in seeing former students and knowing they made a difference. Keith mentioned running into a former student who told him he still hears his voice when getting off track. He responded to this memory by stating, "Knowing you were an influence in their life is amazing."

DISCUSSION

In this study, we interviewed nine participants on how reports of school shootings have affected them using a phenomenological approach. All educators interviewed have been in the profession for over 11 years, with nearly 90% having taught for more than 15 years. Having witnessed the evolution of school settings as shootings became more prevalent, these educators' histories provided a unique lens through which to analyze the Three Es of trauma: the Event, the Experience, and the Effect (Flatow et al., 2015). While the educators were not direct victims, the persistent reports of school

violence functioned as the traumatic Event. Because trauma is defined by the individual's Experience (i.e., how they label and assign meaning to a threat), these veteran educators experienced these reports as "physically or emotionally harmful" disruptions to their professional worldviews. The resulting data highlights the long-lasting Effects on their sense of security and job satisfaction, beginning to fill the gap in understanding the experiences relating to gun violence in schools (Lee, 2013).

The first theme, autonomic arousal, revealed activation of the sympathetic nervous system (SNS) in many participants, representing a clear Effect of traumatic exposure. SAMHSA notes that such effects may include an "altering of one's neuro-physiological make-up" and an inability to manage cognitive processes, such as emotions and attention (Flatow et al., 2015, p. 33). Their immediate reactions included various forms of hyperarousal, which mobilizes the body to fight or flee, and hypoarousal, which includes freezing and shutdown (Asbrand et al., 2022). Reactions ranged from numbing to vigilance and mobilization to control the factors they could. Some individuals reported feeling almost desensitized to the reports, stating that they occur too frequently, a pattern consistent with much of the existing data (Rapa et al., 2024; Sandy Hook Promise, n.d.). By identifying these physical and emotional shifts, this study facilitates the second "R" of a trauma-informed approach, which is Recognizing the signs and symptoms of trauma in staff members (Flatow et al., 2015).

These symptoms of autonomic arousal could be conceptualized as forms of STS resulting from secondary exposure to school shootings (Fallahi & Lesik, 2009). Beyond their professional lives, teachers have personal histories and unique contexts that shape their Experience of this autonomic arousal (Flatow et al., 2015). SAMHSA defines the experience of an event as a critical component in determining whether that event is traumatic, as it is shaped by the individual's labels and assigned meanings (Flatow et al., 2015). Individuals with a trauma history are more susceptible to developing symptoms of STS; therefore, teachers with their own trauma history may be more impacted by this autonomic arousal than others, necessitating research into trauma-informed leadership that prioritizes workforce stability (Leung et al., 2023).

The impact of the school climate on overall feelings of safety emerged as the second theme in this study. This theme directly reflects SAMHSA's first principle of Safety, which asserts that staff and students must feel both physically and psychologically safe (Flatow et al., 2015). The participants discussed how the environment contributed to their overall sense of Safety and well-being, which supports prior findings (Flatow et al., 2015; Obeidat, 2024). Almost all participants reported feeling safe in their schools; however, several factors significantly affected this Experience, including the allocation of appropriate resources and administrator support (Flatow et al., 2015). SAMHSA defines the Experience of trauma as being shaped by how an individual labels and is disrupted by their surroundings (Flatow et al., 2015). When educators felt empowered and supported, their sense of safety increased. This aligns with previous research, which shows that leadership support fosters resilience and better prepares educators for challenging circumstances (Gregersen, 2021; Sprang et al., 2025).

These teachers acknowledged an underlying concern about potential school shootings but denied that it would keep them from doing their jobs, and they refused

to dwell on it. On the other hand, this theme underscores the significance of recognizing how a lack of support can contribute to the shortage of educators (Teachers of Tomorrow, 2024). In a trauma-informed system, interpersonal interactions must promote a sense of security to prevent the adverse Effects of secondary stress. This finding highlights the importance of the second "R" in the SAMHSA framework, which is Recognizing that the school climate can either mitigate or exacerbate an educator's experience of trauma (Flatow et al., 2015).

The third theme focused on preparation for a possible school shooting and its side effects. The educators in this study felt that annual training helped them visualize what they would do in the event of an active shooter; however, at times, they thought they should have been informed about the intensity of live training. From a trauma-informed perspective, SAMHSA suggests that an organization must Respond by fully integrating knowledge about trauma into all policies and procedures (Flatow et al., 2015). When training involves high-intensity simulations without adequate psychological preparation, it may fail to Resist Re-traumatization for staff members who have their own trauma histories (Flatow et al., 2015). Others felt as though they were going through the motions and wondered whether it would be effective if something happened.

These expectations may contribute to stressful working conditions, leading teachers to leave the profession (Teachers of Tomorrow, 2024; Wentworth et al., 2024). There was a sense that more could be done to help students feel connected to one another and to the school. The teachers in this study sought to build relationships with struggling students as a precaution. This concept is a focus of previous research regarding violence prevention because it encourages breaking the “code of silence” (Ellington et al., 2023, p. 4). It also supports the need for a universal trauma-informed approach that seeks to Realize the widespread impact of trauma and understand potential paths for recovery (Flatow et al., 2015; Watson & Astor, 2025). Teachers recognize the urgency of students' desire for safe, secure relationships; they also seek the same consideration for themselves in these intensive training sessions.

The fourth theme, collective stress, addressed areas outside the school’s control that were impacting all members of the community. They focused on the Effect these factors had on adolescent mental health and the potential threat of school shootings. SAMHSA notes that the Experience of trauma is shaped by an individual’s life circumstances and the context of powerlessness in which they occur (Flatow et al., 2015). COVID-19, social media, societal stress, and government policies are cited as contributing to the way students communicate with one another.

These external pressures can be viewed through the lens of lasting adverse Effects of trauma, which SAMHSA defines as an inability to trust and benefit from relationships or manage cognitive processes like emotions and behavior (Flatow et al., 2015). Research shows how the combination of these factors and the underlying threat of school violence can negatively impact student success, mental health, and teacher retention (Green, 2020; Wentworth et al., 2024; Yang et al., 2021). This theme again shows the importance of trauma-informed practices. There has been collective stress (and, in some cases, trauma) among all students and staff, which requires mutual understanding, a focus on strengths, and collaborative efforts (Watson & Astor, 2025).

These concerns align with the fifth theme, emphasizing the need for understanding and collaborative action. Educators strive to balance the external factors that can enhance adolescent mental health and school safety. This balance requires adherence to SAMHSA's principle of Collaboration and Mutuality, which advocates for a leveling of power differences between staff and administrators (Flatow et al., 2015). Unfortunately, the study participants often feel they lack allies who understand what is happening inside the schools.

With hundreds of thousands of students impacted by gun violence and massive teacher shortages, everyone needs to advocate for change together (Amitai & Houtte, 2022; Sandy Hook Promise, n.d.; Wentworth et al., 2024). Collaborative action and inclusive decision-making foster both a positive school climate and trauma-informed schools (Obeidat, 2024; Watson & Astor, 2025). These efforts strengthen the experience of Voice and Choice for educators, ensuring that their unique professional experiences are validated by the organization (Flatow et al., 2015). Systemic implementation of trauma-informed practices and advocacy efforts is essential for effective change to occur (L'Estrange & Bentley, 2025).

The final theme, educator resiliency, is one of the most impactful aspects of this study. Although educators are continually confronted with concerns about their safety in schools, they believe the benefits outweigh the drawbacks. This resilience aligns with the SAMHSA principle of Empowerment, which suggests that throughout a trauma-informed organization, individuals' strengths are recognized, built on, and validated (Flatow et al., 2015). They are motivated to make a difference in their students' lives and are rewarded by the relationships they build with their students. They see the impact they can have and continue to show up for our children.

These connections are a primary vehicle for stability, as a trauma-informed approach recognizes that healing occurs in relationships and through the meaningful sharing of power (Flatow et al., 2015). Their persistence and desire to create relationships with students may be a significant factor in keeping many of our schools safe (Ellington et al., 2023). By fostering an environment where educator strengths are validated, school systems can better support the workforce as they navigate the adverse effects of secondary trauma (Flatow et al., 2015).

Implications

This study has implications for current school counselors and school leadership, particularly regarding the intersection of educator well-being and workforce stability. The findings highlight that in an era of prevalent school violence, systemic support must extend beyond student-focused interventions to address the STS experienced by educators (Flatow et al., 2015).

School Counselors

The results emphasize that school counselors are essential in fostering a trauma-informed climate that prioritizes the "Recognizing" and "Responding" elements of the SAMHSA framework (Flatow et al., 2015).

- Trauma Literacy and STS Awareness: School counselors can provide professional development to help teachers understand that symptoms such as autonomic arousal are neurophysiological responses to their work environment. This includes training on the signs of STS to ensure educators do not feel their reactions are isolated or abnormal.
- Relational Safety: Because healing and resilience happen within relationships, counselors should lead initiatives that promote kindness, positivity, and peer support among staff. Strengthening these connections serves as a protective factor, consistent with research identifying rapport as a vital element before and after a crisis.
- Universal Trauma-Informed Practices: Counselors can guide administrators and staff in adopting a universal approach where feeling psychologically safe is recognized as beneficial for everyone, reducing the need for individual trauma identification.

School Leadership

The study underscores that trauma-informed leadership is a primary determinant of school climate and teacher retention.

- Trustworthiness and Transparency: Participants consistently reported feeling safer when leaders were visible, communicative, and responsive. Leadership must ensure that organizational decisions are transparent to build and maintain trust among staff who are navigating a climate of vigilance.
- Resisting Re-traumatization in Safety Protocols: Administrators serve as gatekeepers to safety training and must ensure these protocols do not inadvertently cause harm. This study suggests that high-intensity drills should be co-created with staff input to ensure the methods resist re-traumatization and include psychological support for those with personal trauma histories.
- Empowerment Through Voice and Choice: To mitigate burnout and attrition, leaders must move toward a model of Collaboration and Mutuality. This involves including educators in the decision-making process for safety measures, ensuring their "voice and choice" are validated rather than ignored in favor of student-only security.
- Systemic Commitment to Well-being: Leadership must treat educator well-being as a fundamental component of the education system. By advocating for realistic safety protocols and providing the resources needed to foster a supportive climate, leaders can simultaneously enhance school safety and address the nationwide teacher shortage.

Limitations

While this study contributes important insights into educators' experiences with school shootings, several limitations should be acknowledged to contextualize the scope and transferability of the results. First, the use of purposive and snowball

sampling introduces the risk of selection bias, potentially resulting in a non-representative sample (Etikan et al., 2016).

Although participants were drawn from a range of geographical contexts, the majority identified as White. Only two participants identified as Black, and the study did not capture the perspectives of other ethnic minority groups. This demographic imbalance may have affected the findings (Jager et al., 2017). In addition to the absence of ethnically diverse perspectives, the participants in this study had extensive educational experience, with at least 11 years, and many had more than 20 years of experience. While this study shows how experienced teachers may be affected by reports of school shootings, it does not capture the perspectives of novice educators, who could offer essential insights into teacher retention. It is possible that we were unable to recruit novice educators due to the high percentage of educators leaving the profession in the first five years (Zhang & Zeller, 2016). The findings may have revealed more about how this topic relates to teacher retention if we had included participants earlier in their careers. Relatedly, self-selection bias may have influenced the sample, as those more willing to speak about school shootings may have different experiences and perspectives than those who declined to participate. Finally, the study relied solely on self-report interviews, which are subject to memory limitations, selective disclosure, and social desirability bias. Because interviews were the only method of data collection, triangulation with additional sources, such as observations, policy documents, or surveys, was not possible, potentially limiting the depth and corroboration of the findings.

Future Research

Future research could include the experiences of parents and students regarding reports of school shootings. Focus groups of stakeholders (e.g., administrators, teachers, staff, students, parents, and community members) would further the conversation, leading to more in-depth, substantive discussions about how to collaborate more effectively. The combination of these populations would inform school administrators, school boards, and legislators about what is happening in schools and which issues to target. Researchers may also consider addressing concerns about the need for additional staff support and training. The outcomes of this study suggest that a more trauma-informed approach to active shooter training for staff is warranted. Uncovering ways to support teachers and staff better would provide valuable insights for future training development.

CONCLUSION

Findings from this study inform new ways to support educators navigating the underlying threat of school shootings. By applying SAMHSA's trauma-informed framework, schools can move beyond surface-level security to address the Experience and Effects of secondary trauma on the workforce (Flatow et al., 2015). This study illustrates that exposure to reports of school shootings negatively affects educator well-being and that these safety concerns are a primary driver for leaving the profession.

To mitigate these consequences, school leadership must transition from compliance-based safety to trauma-informed leadership. This involves:

- Recognizing and Responding: Identifying the signs of autonomic arousal in staff as legitimate traumatic effects and integrating that knowledge into supportive policies.
- Resisting Re-traumatization: Ensuring that safety protocols and intense active shooter trainings are co-created with staff to avoid triggering those with personal trauma histories.
- Collaboration and Mutuality: Fostering a climate where educators have a meaningful sharing of power and decision-making, ensuring their Voice and Choice are validated.
- Empowerment through Relationships: Supporting the connections between teachers and students, which this study identifies as a core source of resiliency and a vital component of a safe school environment. (Flatow et al., 2015)

Ultimately, this research raises awareness of the significant weight educators bear in contemporary society and the urgent need for systemic collaboration. School counselors and administrators are uniquely positioned to lead this change by implementing trauma-informed practices that protect the psychological safety of the entire school community. By prioritizing the well-being of the educator, schools can foster a more stable, resilient, and safe environment for our children.

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