Professional Educators' Perceptions of Active Shooter Drills

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Background

In 2022, 177 gunfire related incidents on school grounds were reported in the U.S. with 148 of these being injuries and 57 resulting in death.[1] Among the 95% of U.S. schools that conduct active shooter drills, the most widely practiced type is a traditional lockdown drill, with doors locked, lights off, and students in an out-of-sight corner.[2] In Vermont, the Agency of Education mandates active shooter drills in the form of options-based training, for all public schools. However, specific guidelines for these drills are not provided. While lockdown-styled drills remain common in Vermont, there is a growing emergence of adaptive drills, such as *Run-Hide-Fight.*

Minimal data is available on the efficacy of active shooter drills and there are growing concerns related to a lack of guidance and potential harmful effects on students' mental health. **The purpose of this study is to gain insight on professional educators' perceptions of preparedness, emotional consequences on students, and efficacy of active shooter drills in Chittenden County public schools.**

Methods

Mixed-methods, case-study approach

REDCap survey consisting of 12 multiple choice questions and 2 free text questions with an option to participate in virtual interview

Survey sent to all school districts within Chittenden County to assess the perception of students' responses to active shooter drills

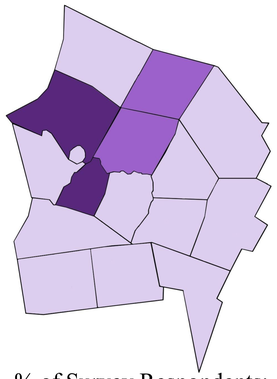
Target respondents: school administrators, educators, mental health professionals, and other support staff

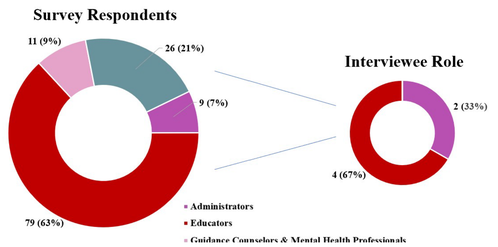
125 survey responses

6 Zoom interviews conducted; information deidentified such that interviewees could not be traced to specific survey results

Interviews were coded utilizing audio recordings and transcribed notes to identify common themes

Results

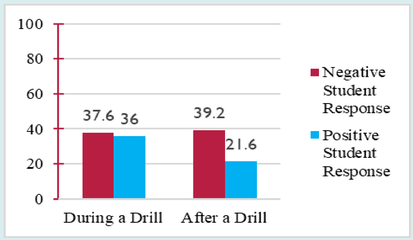




Of Respondents:

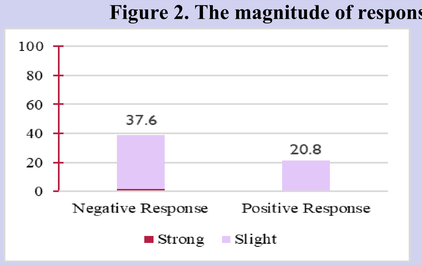
- **91.2%** have participated in drills
- **55.2%** believe their students are more prepared for an active shooter event
- **72.8%** of educators see a difference in reaction compared to other drills, with **11.2%** seeing a strong difference

Figure 1. Adverse effects on students during and after active shooter drills



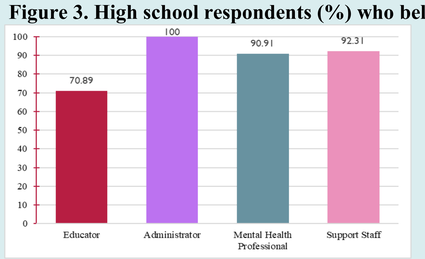
37.6% of respondents who observed some negative response **during** a drill
36% of respondents who observed some positive response **during** a drill
39.2% of respondents who observed some negative response **after** a drill
21.6% of respondents who observed some positive response **after** a drill

Figure 2. The magnitude of responses after the active shooter drills



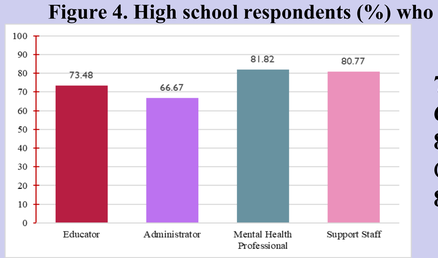
1.6% observed a strong negative response (crying, visible panic) **after** a drill
37.6% observed a negative response (anxiety) **after** a drill
20.8% observed a positive (calm, cooperative) response **after** a drill
0.8% observed a strong positive response (empowered, confident) **after** a drill

Figure 3. High school respondents (%) who believe there are sufficient mental health resources



70.89% High School Educators
100% High School Administrators
90.91% High School Guidance Counselors
92.31% High School Support Staff

Figure 4. High school respondents (%) who believe there is value in active shooter drills



73.48% High School Educators
66.67% High School Administrators
81.82% High School Guidance Counselors
80.77% High School Support Staff

Interview Themes

There is value in active shooter drills.

Educators feel the active shooter drills better prepared them and their students.

Uniform guidelines are necessary.

There are not enough school mental health resources.

Students express negative emotions after active shooter drills.

Despite the negative emotions expressed by students, lack of guidance for educators, and limited mental health support, all interviewees found value in the active shooter drills and the majority felt more prepared because of them.

Discussion

- Most professional educators in Chittenden County see **value** to active shooter drills, regardless of perceived adverse effects seen in students or method of drill.
- A majority of educational professionals report that students have a **different reaction to active shooter drills when compared to other practices,** such as fire drills. This might indicate a negative association with active shooter drills.
- **Negative responses**, such as acute outbursts of distress, are seen both during and after active shooter drills, suggesting evidence of lingering psychological effects resulting from lockdown drills.
- However, a nearly-identical number of respondents observed some **positive response** in students during active shooter drills.
- Mixed responses regarding adverse effects observed among students underscores the important need to **standardize drill guidelines** to minimize variability.

Recommendations

- ✓ Ensure schools have adequate mental health resources to address potential adverse effects following active shooter drills.
- ✓ Vermont public schools may benefit from uniform guidelines for active shooter drills from the Agency of Education.
- ✓ Expand data collection to all schools in Vermont and directly assess students' perceptions.
- ✓ Assess broader issue of gun control as it relates to the necessity of conducting lockdown drills.

References

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