

Majority of Tennessee Parents Agree on Several School Firearm Safety Measures

School-based gun violence was among the top five concerns identified by Tennessee parents in the 2022 [Vanderbilt Child Health Poll](#), and the highest majority of parents, 83%, agree that schools are safer if one or more school resource officers work in the school.

Generally, a majority of Tennessee parents agree on several firearm-related school safety measures. Most parents agree schools are safer if background checks are expanded to all gun sales (71%); if active shooter drills are conducted routinely (71%); if students, staff and visitors go through a metal detector prior to entering a school (70%); and if firearm access “can be temporarily restricted through civil court order for persons who pose a risk to themselves or others” (64%). However, less than half of parents, 35%, agree that schools are safer if teachers are armed.

More than 1,000 Tennessee parents polled in the fall of 2022 were given a series of statements beginning with “Schools are safer if...” and asked to indicate their level of agreement. These statements included statewide policies as well as school-specific measures.

“Incidents of gunfire on school grounds are increasing, raising understandable concern for Tennessee parents,” said Kelsey Gastineau, MD, FAAP, a pediatric hospitalist at Monroe Carell Jr. Children’s Hospital at Vanderbilt. “This poll highlights that many Tennessee parents identify school-based violence as a priority and agree on practical, multifaceted solutions to address this issue.”

There were variations in response by race and region about arming school teachers. By region, 41% of parents in West Tennessee, 33% of Middle Tennessee parents, and 37% of East Tennessee parents agree schools would be safer if teachers were armed. By race, 39% of white parents agree while 23% of Black parents agree that schools would be safer if teachers were armed.

There were also differences by race about the presence of school resource officers. Statewide, 85% of white parents and 74% of Black parents agreed that schools would be safer if school resource officers worked in the school.

“Concerns about safety in school have been common for Black parents since desegregation,” said Velma McBride Murry, PhD, University Distinguished Professor of Health Policy & Human and Organizational Development. “Our research has documented the long-term consequences of race-related experiences of children in schools, which can begin as early as pre-kindergarten. In that context, it’s not surprising that Black parents may have substantial worry about some measures such as arming teachers.”

Regionally, over half of parents in West and Middle Tennessee (both 59%) agreed that schools are safer if firearms are not allowed on school property. In East Tennessee,

49% of parents agreed that schools were safer if firearms are not allowed. There were also regional differences for increasing the age to purchase a gun to 21 (West: 52%, Middle: 59%, East: 48%) and restricting sale of bump stocks and conversion devices (West: 47%, Middle: 55%, East: 37%).

The Vanderbilt Child Health Poll is conducted annually by the [Vanderbilt Center for Child Health Policy](#) to gauge parents' concerns about a wide range of topics. The data, collected from a representative sample of Tennessee parents across each of the three grand divisions of the state, focus on child health issues ranging from insurance status and overall wellbeing to food security, mental health, and vaccines. The research was funded in part by a grant from the Boedecker Foundation.