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Firearm-Related Tips in a Statewide School Anonymous Reporting System

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Firearm-related injuries are the leading cause of death among children and adolescents.¹ The increase in school shootings, firearm access, and carriage in schools makes firearm injury prevention within schools central to promoting youth safety.² Anonymous reporting systems (ARSs) are used by more than 50% of K-12 schools in the United States to decrease the burden of firearm injuries.³ ARSs leverage the “see-something-say-something” model, which seeks to increase citizen awareness and empowerment to report potentially dangerous items, events, and behaviors.⁴ Yet, little is known regarding the use of school-based ARSs for firearm-related concerns compared with non-firearm-related concerns, particularly when the concern may pose life-threatening risk.

METHODS

Say Something Anonymous Report System (SS-ARS) operates in 23 states, serving more than 5 million sixth through 12th grade students annually. An integral part of SS-ARS is the 24/7 accredited National Crisis Center. At the Center, trained counselors review tips submitted to the SS-ARS system, engage with the tipster, and gather information before classifying the tip urgency and sending tip information to relevant responders (eg, school personnel, emergency medical services). Urgent, “life-safety” tips require immediate school

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team and emergency medical services/police response, whereas “non–life safety” tips may be addressed during regular school hours.

Before SS-ARS implementation, school personnel and students are formally onboarded.⁵ This onboarding process includes creating and training a school response team of educators/administrators to receive triaged tips, update the ARS system as they respond, and “close” tips by documenting any relevant outcomes (eg, safety planning, counseling; Fig 1). Students are trained to identify and submit tips on possible concerning behaviors through the secure SS-ARS App, online platform, or hotline.

In the current study, we examine “closed” SS-ARS data from a Southeastern state implementing SS-ARS in all districts ($n = 103$ school districts; $n = 156$ charter schools) across 4 academic years (2019–2023). Although no data are collected on the tipster, we infer that >90% of tips are submitted by students. Over the 4 academic years of operation, ARS in this state has enabled 1039 confirmed mental health interventions; 109 “saves” where clear evidence of imminent suicide crisis was present and averted; prevented 38 acts of school-violence including weapons recovered on school grounds; and averted 6 confirmed planned school attacks (definitions used by Sandy Hook Promise Foundation. Mental health intervention: any tip in which the reported person received on going counseling or therapy as a result of the information provided in the tip. Save: any tip in which clear evidence that an imminent suicide crisis was (1) present and (2) the reported person received immediate medical support (via hospitalization). School violence prevention: any tip that resulted in a potential school threat being averted. This includes potential school shootings, online threats, and tips where weapons (knife, sword, etc) that would have been used to cause harm, were recovered. Averted planned school attack: a subcategory of school violence prevention tips, whereby the tip meets all 3 of the following criteria: (1) the Crisis Center received the initial report and the information was not already known by the school or local law enforcement; (2) there was a written or verbal threat to attack a school; and (3) the person being reported on had access to a weapon.)

Natural language processing and traditional statistics were used to analyze tip data. The lead author reviewed a subset of tips (~10%) and created an initial set of firearm-related terms. This set was refined by all other coauthors, who are experts in adolescent mental health and firearm and school safety research, producing a final set of query terms (ie, gun, shotgun, pistol, ammo, firearm, semiautomatic, musket, rifle, bullet, shot up, shoot, Glock, blickie) used in a dictionary-based tagging method.⁶ Then, descriptive and χ^2 analyses were used to describe the prevalence of firearm-related tips by event, urgency, and outcome. All analyses were conducted in R4.2.2.⁷

RESULTS

Across the 4 academic years, 18024 unique tips were reported, and 1774 (9.8%) of these tips referenced 1 or more firearm-related terms. Firearm-related tips included potential school shootings (38.2%), seeing or knowing of a weapon (22.5%), intent for interpersonal violence (8.9%), bullying or cyberbullying (3.2%), suicide (3.2%), a planned fight or assault (3.1%), gang violence (3.0%), and harassment or intimidation (2.4%). The distribution differed from

non–firearm-related tips, which commonly concerned bullying/harassment or mental health (Table 1). More than half of firearm-related tips were classified as life-threatening (51.1%), which was 5 times greater than the proportion of tips that were not related to firearms ($P < .001$). The most common outcomes were notification of parents (39.0%), school disciplinary (22.2%) or nondisciplinary (19.5%) actions, police welfare checks (15.6%), and continued monitoring by school personnel (15.1%). Issuance of a citation, recovery of a weapon, hospitalization, restorative practices, safety planning, and establishing a treatment plan occurred in <2.0% of tips.

DISCUSSION

Youth use ARS to submit firearm-related tips on a variety of threats, the most common being a potential school shooting. However, forms of interpersonal violence, such as intent to harm someone and bullying, were also common, echoing research that has found firearm-related injury in adolescence is most commonly the result of interpersonal violence.⁸ Suicide concerns were one third as common in firearm-related tips; however, firearm-related tips for suicide concerns are important as suicide remains a leading cause of death in adolescents⁹ and risk for injury and suicide completion rises exponentially with firearms as a means.¹⁰

More than half of firearm-related tips were classified as life-safety events, with outcomes overwhelmingly at the family or school level. The urgency of firearm-related tips highlights the need to educate families on firearm violence prevention and ensure support and response protocols for school systems. Greater awareness of ARS systems and their usage by adolescents for firearm-related threats among public health and medical personnel could create opportunities for additional service and support for adolescents and remove some of the burden from families and school systems in responding to tips that are often life-threatening.

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ABBREVIATIONS

| | |
|---------------|---------------------------------------|
| ARS | Anonymous Report Systems |
| SS-ARS | Say Something Anonymous Report System |

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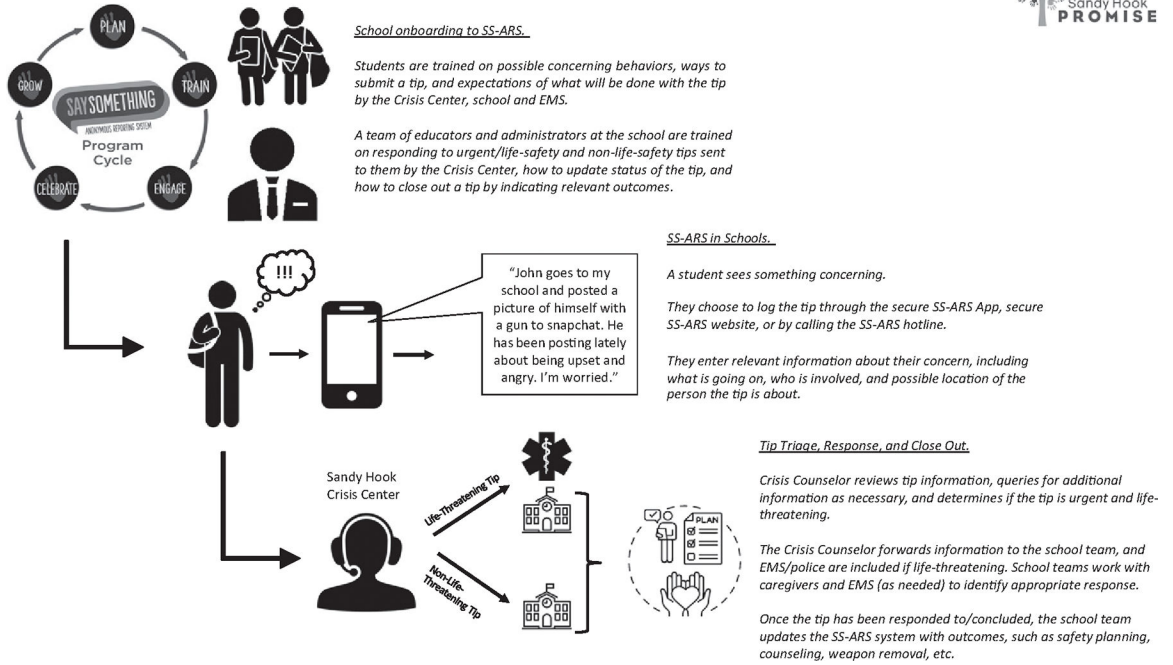


FIGURE 1. Say Something Anonymous Report System (SS-ARS) Tip Process Flow.

TABLE 1

Tipster-Indicated Event Type, All Tips, and Firearm-Related Tips^a

| Event | Firearm-Related Tips | Tips Not Related to Firearms |
|--------------------------|----------------------|------------------------------|
| Planned school attack | 38.22% | 1.80% |
| Weapon | 22.32% | 0.90% |
| Intent to harm someone | 8.85% | 2.10% |
| Bullying/cyber bullying | 3.16% | 19.70% |
| Suicide/suicide ideation | 3.16% | 8.90% |
| Planned fight/assault | 3.10% | 1.90% |
| Gang violence/activity | 2.99% | 0.70% |
| Harassment/intimidation | 2.42% | 5.80% |

^aEvents with 0.5% to 2.0% of firearm-related tips include: anger issues, hate crime/hate speech, reckless/dangerous behavior, cutting/self-harm, drug use/distribution, depression/anxiety, concern about an adult. Events with <0.5% of firearm-related tips: domestic violence/child abuse, verbal abuse, sharing inappropriate photos, physical abuse, sexual harassment, inappropriate relationship, animal cruelty, general school complaint, inappropriate language/behavior/gesture, intimidation, sexual assault/rape, theft, toxic/abusive relationship, assault, drunk/under the influence, eating disorder, harm to building/property, hostile environment, inappropriate use of school technology, planned parties, sexual exploitation/abuse, social isolation/withdrawal, spam tip, substance abuse, threat against school, vandalism, abusive/unhealthy relationship, alcohol possession, bodily injury - emergency condition, breaks district code of conduct, discrimination, bullying/acoso cibemético, forgery/false documents, discrimination, forgery/false documents, hazing, homeless/runaway student, human trafficking, inappropriate behavior by school personnel, inappropriate bus behavior, possession of drug paraphernalia, reckless driving on school property, sex trafficking, sexting, smoking, stranger/potential predator on school grounds, theft (not active), and truancy.