

**Damon R. Maher**

Legislator, 10<sup>th</sup> District  
Chair, Labor & Housing



Committee Assignments  
Budget & Appropriations  
Intergovernmental Services  
Parks, Planning & Economic Development  
Public Safety  
Seniors & Constituencies

**MEMORANDUM**

TO: Benjamin Boykin, Chair, Board of Legislators

FROM: Damon R. Maher, Legislator – 10<sup>th</sup> District

DATE: February 15, 2019

RE: **Article – What Are Active-Shooter Drills Doing to Kids?**

Please add the attached article from The Atlantic dated February 28, 2018 entitled “What Are Active-Shooter Drills Doing to Kids?” by James Hamblin to the Budget & Appropriations, Social Services and Public Safety committees on behalf of Legislator Maher.

Here is a link to the article: <https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2018/02/effects-of-active-shooter/554150/>.

## HEALTH

# What Are Active-Shooter Drills Doing to Kids?

The psychological effects of realistic simulations could be dangerous.

JAMES HAMBLIN FEB 28, 2018

---



EXOPIXEL / SHUTTERSTOCK / KATIE MARTIN / THE ATLANTIC

---

There's always at least one kid in tears, as they huddle under their desks in the dark. Still Beth Manias, an early-elementary literacy teacher outside of Seattle, tries to act upbeat and relaxed.

"I have them whisper about their favorite candy, dinner, books, movies—whatever, as a distraction," Manias told me. She tells the kids they're practicing to stay safe in case there's ever a bear on

campus. Though, she admits, “They *always* see through this. The older they get, the more savvy they become, probably because they are exposed to more of the news.”

At schools across the country, more children are taking part in mandatory “active-shooter drills.” Forgoing any pretense of a bear, sometimes a faculty member plays the role of a shooter, jiggling doorknobs as children practice keeping perfectly silent. Many parents, teachers, and students say that the experience is somewhere between upsetting and traumatizing.

Which may be worthwhile, if it were clear that the drills saved lives.

Active-shooter drills came into existence after the Columbine massacre in 1999. What is known of their long-term psychological effects comes from the reports of people now in early adulthood.

Ryan Marino, an emergency-medicine physician at the University of Pittsburgh, recalled that his school had adopted the drills during that period, after a student was found to have a “death list” and access to guns. He told me the drills didn’t seem real until he was 12, and a fellow student coughed during one of the drills. “The teacher told us that if this had been real, we would all be dead.”

“That single experience shaped my childhood,” Marino said. “Having to practice and prepare for a peer coming to my school and shooting at me and my friends was something that really changed the overall atmosphere. Looking back, it was a major shift in how the world felt.”

In the two weeks since the shooting at a high school in Parkland, Florida, new and renewed calls for such drills raise the question of whether they do any good—and if they might be doing harm.

The day after the event, Susan Hennessey, the executive editor of *Lawfare*, tweeted: “Feeling mildly nauseous reading a note from my kid’s preschool about implementing active-shooter drills.”

Brian Leff, a writer in Los Angeles, told me his fifth-grade daughter’s principal just announced the school is contemplating a surprise lockdown drill. “Now my daughter can’t stop thinking about when it’s going to happen and how she’ll know if it’s ‘real’ or not.”

The writer Allison Gibson says that at her 4-year-old son’s preschool, they’re called “self-control drills,” because the goal is to get the students very quiet. “The first time he mentioned it, when he was 2, I had to piece together what he was referring to, and it nearly broke me.”

Of course, general lockdown and disaster drills have a long history; a generation of Americans came of age hiding under desks from nuclear bombs. While the idea of such a maneuver protecting a person from a bomb blast or nuclear fallout became fodder for jokes, the drills themselves had insidious effects on kids’ senses of safety. Some teachers reported that students’ artwork changed to feature mushroom clouds and sometimes the child’s own death, bringing a pervasive sense of danger into the places where kids most need to feel safe.

Despite some similarities to natural-disaster and Cold War drills, active-shooter drills also mean exposing kids to the idea that at any point, someone they know may try to kill them.

“It’s good to do emergency drills, but active shooters are not a drill anyone should have to do,” says Meredith Corley, who taught math in Colorado in the aftermath of Columbine. “It re-traumatizes kids who have experienced violence. Getting the kids settled back into the work of learning after lockdown drills is a nightmare. That mind-set has no place in a learning environment.”

“I was slightly too young for bomb drills, but in greater Kansas City, tornado drills were de rigueur,” says Lily Alice, a Midwesterner born in 1965. “We did have tornados now and then. The difference, of course, is that no one stockpiles them to use against other people, and weather forecasts mitigated some fear.”

Even President Trump, who has expressed support for arming teachers, has warned against active-shooter drills. During a White House meeting last week, he said, “If I’m a child and I’m 10 years old, and they say we’re going to have an active-shooter drill, I say, ‘What’s that?’ ‘Well, people may come in and shoot you’—I think that’s a very negative thing ... to be honest. I don’t like it.”

Zachary Levinsky, a lecturer in the department of sociology at the University of Toronto at Mississauga, is one of few academics who has studied active-shooter drills. He argues that though some school violence always existed, Columbine marked a shift of the burden of prevention: “Schools were somehow positioned as blamable—as responsible for these massacres.” This created an institutional concern for reputational risk management. To

implement something like an active-shooter drill was to signal to parents and the community that the school is being proactive—it was doing *something*.

Of course, a demand for action does not often make for prudent decisions when it comes to harm reduction. Drills cover administrator and school-district liability, and they may make parents feel better knowing that their kids are in a school that's taking decisive action. But what are the longer-term effects on the children's health and development?

Studies of whether active-shooter drills actually prevent harm are all but impossible. Case studies are difficult to parse. In Parkland, for example, the site of the recent shooting, Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, had an active-shooter drill just last month. The shooter had been through such drills. Purposely countering them may have been a reason that, as he was beginning his rampage, the shooter pulled a fire alarm.

In any case, preparedness drills always change the baseline level of risk that people perceive. This heightening can manifest as stress and anxiety, not to mention changing the way kids understand how people treat one another—to even consider violence an option, not in some abstract way.

Colleen Derkatch, an associate professor at Ryerson University in Toronto, studies how we assess risk when it comes to our health. “The more prepared we are, the more heightened our sense of risk,” she told me. “And one potential effect we haven't considered is how these kinds of preparedness activities affect kids

psychologically, and could increase a sense of feeling at risk. They really expand the ways in which we feel increasingly under siege.”

Preparedness activities, that is, are never neutral. Derkatch’s work relates this concept to the anxiety wrought by a culture of “wellness” products, which are ostensibly meant to keep us healthy, but also enhance our awareness of health risks. “They give us a sense that we’re all constantly on the edge of illness,” Derkatch told me. “Preparedness can be a good thing, but it has very real costs and consequences. For children whose personalities are just forming—who are figuring out what kind of world they live in—if this is the input they get, I think it will have a significant impact down the road.”

The idea extends to the fact that a child is much more likely to be abused by a parent than shot in school; but there would be obvious limits to the value of putting kids through realistic simulations in which a parent turns on them.

Derkatch has an 11-year-old daughter who is in the sixth grade. In her school, they’ve done lockdown drills, but the drills are the sort that are generalizable to any emergency. The teachers are very clear that it’s just a drill, and they lock the doors, and kids stay in their seats. There’s no hiding or barricading, as many schools in the United States now require.

If you were to move to the United States, I asked Derkatch, would you want your daughter going through these sorts of drills?

“No,” she said. “But I wouldn’t move to the United States. And guns are the reason why. Guns and health care.”

The two are, of course, now intertwined. President Trump and many other Republicans have a penchant for blaming “mental illness” for mass shootings—even though most shooters have no known or diagnosable mental illness. People who are mentally ill are much more likely to be victims than murderers. Most are rather, like the shooter in Parkland, described as isolated, troubled, angry, resentful men and boys. Many have a history of childhood trauma, like being abused or neglected. It is rare that a shooter has come up in an environment with multiple adults on whom they could rely—where they felt safe and secure.

A sense of safety and security in childhood is integrally tied to mental and physical health later in life—as well as emotional wellbeing, and the formation of the coping mechanisms that allow a person to deal with later adversity in ways that do not involve killing. It is this sense that can be undermined sometimes even by the best of intentions.

“Kids perceive the world generally as a bit of a dangerous place now because of how they tend to be closely supervised at almost all times,” said Derkatch. “If you look at the proposals in the United States, it sounds like they’re trying to make schools an awful lot like prisons, with monitored perimeters and armed guards and possibly armed teachers. You could extrapolate from the experiences of kids living in potentially violent situations, where you never know what’s going to happen. That does have a profound impact on kids.”

“I will never be able to explain it well, but losing a feeling of safety as a child, especially at school, is a major thing,” said Marino, the emergency physician who was terrified to cough. “Anyone who has



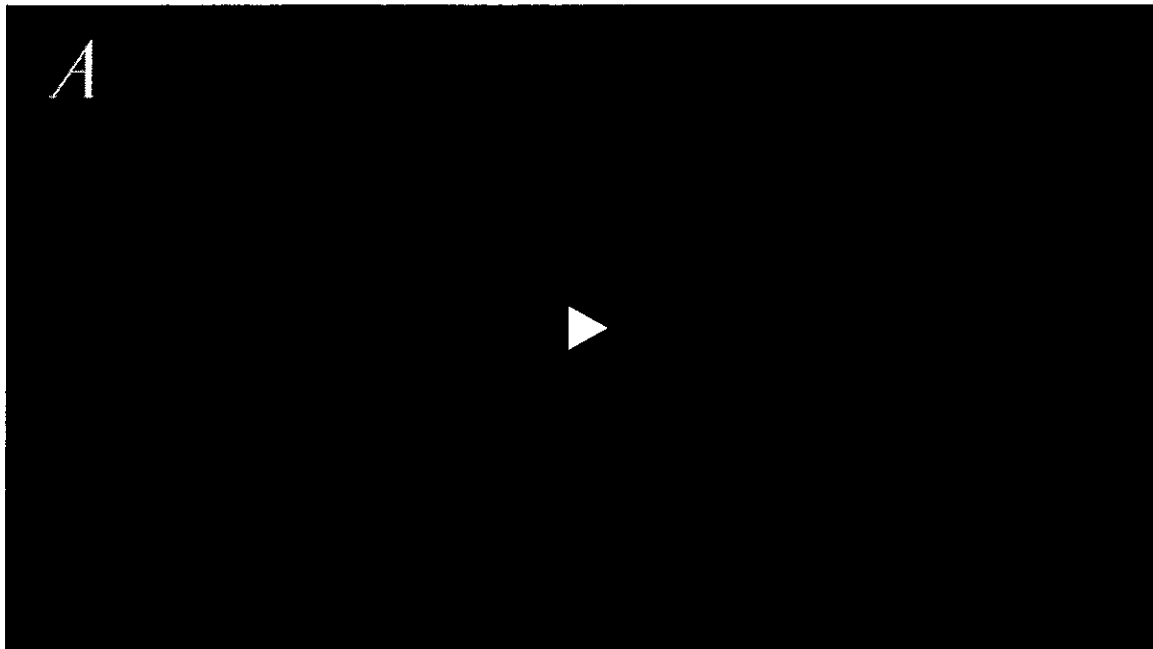
not gone through school with active-shooter drills can never understand what it feels like.”

---

*We want to hear what you think about this article. Submit a letter to the editor or write to [letters@theatlantic.com](mailto:letters@theatlantic.com).*

---

## Related Video



---

### MARK THE NEWS AS READ

Get a roundup of the most important and intriguing stories from around the world, delivered to your inbox every weekday.

Sign Up

---

### THE VALUE OF GOOD JOURNALISM



**ABOUT**

---

**CONTACT**

---

**PODCASTS**

---

**SUBSCRIPTION**

---

**FOLLOW**

---

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Advertising Guidelines](#) | [Terms Conditions](#) | [Responsible Disclosure](#) | [U.S. Edition](#) | [World Edition](#) | [Site Map](#)

TheAtlantic.com Copyright © 2019 by The Atlantic Monthly Group. All Rights Reserved.

