1. Psychedelics and Veterans’ Mental Health
Veterans represent a sizable segment of mental health care consumers in the U.S. Given the rapidly evolving legal and policy landscape surrounding the use and supply of psychedelics to address such mental health conditions as depression, anxiety, posttraumatic stress disorder, and substance use disorders, the federal government must consider how best to support veterans and their health care providers.
MORE AT www.rand.org/t/PEA1363-6

2. Wait Times for Veterans Scheduling Health Care Appointments
In September 2022, senior policy researcher Carrie Farmer, director of the RAND Epstein Family Veterans Policy Research Institute, testified before the U.S. Senate Committee on Veterans’ Affairs on challenges with available data on the timeliness and quality of the VA Community Care program.
MORE AT www.rand.org/CTA2291-1

3. Unvaccinated Service Members
Last December, Congress unveiled a compromise on legislation as part of the National Defense Authorization Act that would remove the mandate for service members to be vaccinated against COVID-19. In removing the mandate, the U.S. military will join nearly 14 percent of companies that once had, but have recently abandoned, their vaccine mandates.
MORE AT www.rand.org/b221219

4. Climate Hazard and Mitigation Planning
The Climate Hazard and Mitigation Planning online tool is an interactive website that provides users with a single point of access to county-, state-, and region-specific historical climate and hazard data and projected climate information. The tool displays climate metrics, hazard data, and hazard impacts in a visual format with downloadable data visualizations and tables that are accompanied by explanatory text.
MORE AT www.rand.org/t/TLA386-9

5. Is Permanent Daylight Saving Time a Health Risk?
Senior behavioral and social scientist Wendy Troxel explains why Standard Time is better for overall health and well-being.
MORE AT www.rand.org/v221104
A research–community partnership to protect Sitka, Alaska

Violence Prevention
What schools can do to encourage students to report threats

Critical Materials
The U.S. needs to take steps now to break its reliance on China

Research Briefly
Reducing in-custody deaths and more

Commentary
Housing and America’s racial wealth gap

The Q&A
Giving teachers a voice

Giving
Foundation support to reduce gun violence

A 2015 landslide killed three people in Sitka, Alaska. The community has been working with researchers to develop a warning system to prevent such tragedies in the future. That kind of close collaboration “brings everyone closer to their goals,” one researcher said.
Catching Lies

Can a computer tell when people are lying? Researchers at RAND developed a proof-of-concept machine-learning algorithm that, more often than not, could. The giveaway, they found, was the words people used.

The researchers had 103 people read an account of a document leak. About half read it as a news story and then answered questions about it. But the other half read it as a secret memo. They were told not to reveal certain details, and to claim when they were questioned about it that they had only read the news article.

The researchers then fed transcripts of the interviews into a computer. It found that the truth-tellers were significantly more likely to use the word “I.” The liars were much more likely to use “you.” By searching for those and other telltale words, the computer was able to correctly sort the liars from the truth-tellers 75.6 percent of the time.

Other computer algorithms, looking at everything from the cadence of how people talked to the emotional stance of what they said, were less successful. But even the lowest-performing algorithm still got it right more than 50 percent of the time.

When the researchers drilled down on the results, however, they found that the computer had a much easier time spotting men who were lying than women. Men were especially likely to use “I” when they were telling the truth, and to avoid it when they were lying. The result was a 20 percentage point gap between the computer’s accuracy scores for men and for women.

RAND’s study was meant to explore the possibilities of computer-aided deception detection. The federal government could refine and scale up such algorithms to help human reviewers process security clearances, for example. Algorithms cannot replace those human reviewers, the researchers wrote, but they could complement existing interview techniques.
Reducing In-Custody Deaths

Hundreds of people die every year in law enforcement custody. Good data could point the way toward better policies and procedures that might prevent some of those deaths. But no single agency is tracking the numbers in a consistent and coordinated way.

The National Institute of Justice asked RAND and RTI International to develop a list of priorities for establishing a comprehensive, national reporting system. Researchers convened a series of virtual discussions with law enforcement officers, academic researchers, mental health experts, and civil liberties advocates.

Federal law requires states to report all in-custody deaths. But several different reporting systems exist. Each collects different information, and none provides a complete picture. As a result, the best estimate is that somewhere between 1,000 and 2,000 people die in law enforcement custody in the United States every year.

The government should broaden the scope of those data-collection efforts to encompass any “critical law enforcement incident,” the researchers wrote. That would include any death during a law-enforcement response and any use of deadly force. The federal government also should provide state and local law enforcement agencies with the funding and guidance to report all such incidents, including the circumstances leading up to every death.

It does not need to build a new reporting system from scratch. Any of the existing systems could work. But agencies need better definitions and more clarity about who should report, when, what data to include, and even what qualifies as “in-custody.”

That level of data could help law enforcement agencies improve their programs, policies, and training to reduce fatalities or unwarranted use of force, the researchers wrote. Without it, there is no way to know whether such efforts are making any difference.

Home-Work

The same technology that allowed millions of American workers to stay home during the COVID-19 pandemic could soon cost some of them their jobs.

The pandemic saw a surge of innovation and investment in remote-work technologies. A recent RAND paper examined growing concerns that companies could use those same technologies to offshore jobs to countries with lower wages. As the Financial Times noted, if you can do your job from anywhere, then someone anywhere can do your job.

At the level of the economy at large, such offshoring might not be a bad thing. Previous research has shown that sending jobs overseas can actually increase demand for high-skilled workers, such as managers, in the U.S. Companies can also cut costs, lower prices, and grow.

But the effects could be devastating for workers whose jobs get shipped overseas, as well as for their communities. One recent study estimated that more than a quarter of U.S. service jobs could be offshored over time. Those most at risk tend to be highly skilled and highly paid, with jobs that don’t require much face-to-face interaction.

Software developers, computer programmers, and data managers are the obvious examples. But some non-tech workers could also see their jobs sent overseas, including architects, interior designers, interpreters, accountants, and order clerks.

There will always be “good jobs” available in the United States, RAND’s paper concluded—but that doesn’t mean everyone will have access to them. The federal government should do more to understand what kind of upskilling or reskilling will help workers compete in a remote-work labor market. Local communities should also follow the trends since the loss of regional jobs could reduce their tax revenue and harm local retailers.

The impacts could be surprisingly wide-ranging. In a future with driverless cars, for example, even taxi services could be managed by someone tapping a keyboard in another country.
Throughout much of America, the housing market is cratering, thanks to ever-higher interest rates. Fears of recession are in the air, too. And as is the case during all economic downturns, middle-class African-Americans are at risk of being particularly hard-hit.

In the wake of the last recession, in 2008, the wealth gap between middle-class African-Americans and White Americans increased by about 20 percent. Even in good economic times, middle-class African-Americans face, on average, more economic vulnerabilities than White Americans for a huge range of reasons. One significant reason is the persistent racial wealth gap, which is fueled by differences in home ownership rates and home values for African-Americans and White Americans. Home ownership is, for the vast majority of Americans, the primary vehicle for accruing wealth, and passing it down through generations.

Recent research suggests that African-Americans made some gains in the housing market during the pandemic, driven by stimulus payments and other COVID-19 economic relief policies. However, the end of those policies, coupled with a potential economic downturn, could reverse those gains. As a result, this is a crucial time for policymakers to consider policies that focus on improving home ownership rates for African-Americans. In addition, more attention should be given to persistent racism in the lending and appraisal industries. These are crucial steps to combat entrenched racism, and to

Jessica Welburn Paige is a behavioral and social scientist at RAND. She uses qualitative methods to explore how African-Americans navigate racism and discrimination and how they think about social mobility in the post–Civil Rights era. The writing of this commentary was generously supported by the RAND Center to Advance Racial Equity Policy.
provide African-Americans with more opportunities to accrue the same sort of generational wealth that White Americans have long been afforded.

African-American families have significantly less wealth than White families, even after reaching the middle class. Data from the 2019 Survey of Consumer Finances show that the average African-American family had a median net worth of $24,100, compared with $189,000 in the average White family. While African-Americans gain wealth as their income rises, the wealth gap between them and White Americans with similar income actually grows. African-Americans at the 75th percentile of the income distribution have a median net worth of $114,000, compared with $573,000 for White Americans.

In times of economic uncertainty, these trends are exacerbated, as African-Americans have fewer economic resources to fall back on than their White counterparts do. As a result, middle-class African-Americans are more vulnerable than White Americans to experiencing significant financial obstacles, including downward economic mobility.

One of the most significant contributors to the racial wealth gap is that African-Americans are less likely than White Americans to own homes. For example, the U.S. Department of the Treasury reports that in the second quarter of 2022, the home ownership rate for African-Americans was 45 percent, compared with 75 percent for White Americans. In fact, the gap between home ownership rates for African-Americans and White Americans has remained relatively unchanged since the 1960s.

When African-Americans do own homes, they are often worth significantly less than the homes that White Americans own. U.S. Department of Treasury data show that on average, homes owned by White Americans are worth 2.5 times more than homes owned by African-Americans. Several factors account for such a difference in home values. On average, African-Americans live in neighborhoods with higher poverty rates, fewer resources, and fewer middle-class households than neighborhoods that White Americans live in. This is the case even when African-Americans reach the middle class and beyond. For example, one study shows that the average affluent Black family lives in a neighborhood with a poverty rate of 14 percent. In contrast, the average affluent White family lives in a neighborhood with a poverty rate of 9 percent.

Further, homes owned by African-Americans are often appraised at lower values than homes owned by White Americans, even when all other factors about the home are equal. This happens because of a combination of historical redlining to keep certain races out of certain neighborhoods, as well as racial bias built into the appraisal process. In recent months, such racist appraisal practices have received considerable media attention after a prominent African-American professor reported a personal experience with a racially biased appraisal; there is also a 2022 documentary film (Our America: Lowballed, from ABC Owned Television Stations) on the subject.

These differences in home ownership rates and home values fuel the racial wealth gap—and they impact African-Americans in other areas of life. For example, the average value of the inheritance that White Americans receive is about $195,000, compared with an average inheritance value of about $100,000 for African-Americans. Data from the Opportunity Insights project show that 37 percent of African-Americans who grow up in middle-class households fall out of the middle class as adults, compared with 25 percent of White Americans. This may be in part because middle-class African-Americans have fewer economic resources to fall back on during challenging times. Thus, focusing on providing more opportunity in the housing market could be an important step toward providing more stability for the African-American middle class, particularly in times such as these, while facing increased economic uncertainty.

There are already, across the country, good examples of programs doing just this. The District of Columbia’s Home Purchase Assistance Program, for example, provides interest-free loans, gap financing, and assistance with closing costs for qualified borrowers. The program targets borrowers that earn incomes below 80 percent of the area median. The Michigan State Housing Development Authority is another such program that provides home loans and down payment assistance for borrowers below certain income levels. However, more such efforts, particularly at the federal level, and focusing specifically on African-Americans, may be necessary to begin making up for the already significant and entrenched wealth gaps. Such programs, coupled with a renewed focus on national-level policies aimed at curbing discrimination in the lending and appraisal industries, could prove crucial to improving economic well-being for middle-class African-Americans.

A version of this commentary appeared on The RAND Blog in December 2022. Commentary gives RAND researchers a platform to convey insights based on their professional expertise and often on their peer-reviewed research and analysis.
Jump-Start

The Time to Prevent Shortfalls in Critical Materials Is Now

By Doug Irving, Staff Writer

Rare earth elements are—despite their name—everywhere. They’re in your cellphone, your car, maybe even in a crown in your mouth. They’re in satellites, wind turbines, night-vision goggles, and laser-guided missiles. By one estimate, every F-35 Lightning II fighter jet has around 920 pounds of rare earth elements built into its engines and electronics.

All of which makes China’s near-total domination of the rare earth market a matter of economic and national security concern.

A recent RAND study looked at what the United States can do to break its reliance on China for critical but hard-to-source materials, using rare earths as a case study. It found that existing plans to diversify the market likely don’t go far enough, fast enough—and the clock is running.

“Things are moving in the right direction,” said Richard Silberglitt, a senior physical scientist at RAND who coauthored the study. “But they need to keep moving, and they probably need to accelerate.”
Rare earths and other critical materials like lithium have been called the building blocks of future innovation. Some can be used to make tiny but powerful magnets, the kind needed to power the next generation of electric cars. Others can withstand extreme temperatures, strengthen metals, polish glass, or serve as chemical catalysts; lithium is a key component of rechargeable batteries. Rare earths are not rare—in fact, some are more common than lead or copper—but they’re hard to mine and hard to separate.

The United States was once the only real player in the rare earth market. China started taking over in the 1980s, using cheaper extraction methods and a greater tolerance for environmental destruction. A Los Angeles Times reporter once described a “crusty lake of radioactive black sludge” near one Chinese mine.

Policymakers need to make investments today that might not yield results for another decade or more.
Then, in 2010, the captain of a Chinese trawler, possibly drunk, rammed a Japanese Coast Guard ship in disputed waters. Japan arrested the captain and detained his crew, setting off a diplomatic standoff with China. Amid the tensions, reports surfaced that China was planning to cut off its rare earth exports to Japan. China has always disputed those reports—but when its exports dipped, rare earth prices shot skyward.

“Things got serious real quick,” said Fabian Villalobos, an engineer at RAND who led the recent study. “That’s when everybody started paying attention to this.”

The U.S. has since moved to loosen its dependence on China. The Pentagon recently increased its stockpiles of rare earths, lithium, and other critical materials. The federal government announced last year that it would invest billions of dollars in bolstering the U.S. battery industry and tens of millions more in building up capacity to separate and process rare earths.

But, for now, nearly all of the rare earth ore that comes out of the ground in the United States still ends up in China for processing into usable powders and metals. China also processes a majority of the world’s lithium-ion battery materials. It builds and sells 92 percent of the rare earth magnets that are needed for electric vehicles, wind turbines, and fighter jets.

RAND’s research team mapped out two paths the U.S. can take to blunt the leverage that kind of market dominance gives China.

It can try to break China’s grip on the market outright. That would mean investing in finding, mining, and refining new deposits of rare earths and other critical materials, at home and abroad. Around 120 million tons of rare earth reserves are thought to exist around the world—and most of them are not in China. Just this year, Sweden announced that it had found a deposit of potentially 1 million tons in its far north. It described the discovery as the beginning of the end of China’s market dominance, illustrating how important it will be to rely on allies, partners, and other countries.

At the same time, though, the U.S. should also brace for the possibility of a supply disruption—from a diplomatic break with China, perhaps, but also from an unexpected shock like COVID-19. That would mean increasing how long companies can survive without Chinese inputs—through stockpiles, for example—and reducing how long it takes them to get back up and running afterward.

None of those options are cheap or easy. Starting up a new mine and processing facility can cost up to $1 billion and take more than a decade. Scientists have developed more environmentally friendly ways to separate and process rare earths, but there will still be impacts that need to be addressed. And while China has entire labs devoted to rare earth mining and processing, the U.S. now has only a handful of scientists who truly focus on rare earths.

“These materials have become essential to our everyday lives,” said Jonathan Brosmer, an associate physical scientist at RAND. “U.S. policymakers really need to find ways to incentivize either domestic or partner nation capabilities to meet our future demand.”

Processing rare earths and other critical materials—not just digging them out of the ground—is the real bottleneck. If every proposed pro-
Future Demand for Rare Earth Oxides (REO)


NOTE: The year refers to the initiation of an activity. This figure assumes a roughly linear demand increase between 2020 and 2025 for all demand and that U.S. market share is maintained.

cessing plant outside of China were to somehow come online by 2025, researchers found, they could produce around 134,000 tons of usable rare earth material every year. Projected demand by 2025, outside of China: 140,000 tons and growing fast.

Given that shortfall, some more-creative solutions are starting to get a closer look. The Defense Department, for example, has invested in efforts to recycle critical materials from old electronics. For now, though, that remains a difficult and expensive option. Some scientists have also started looking at the ocean floor for a possible solution. Rocky concretions about the size of a potato are thought to contain cobalt, manganese, and other critical materials.

But time is an enemy here. Policy-makers need to make investments today that might not yield results for another decade or more. That only underscores the urgency of prioritizing options and investing early in those with the longest lag time.

“If history has taught us anything,” the researchers wrote, “it has taught us that, in a quickly evolving technological world, timing is critical, and the time to act is now.”

U.S. demand for REOs is considerably smaller, only about 7 percent of global demand. China consumes over half of all REOs and is expected to maintain that level of demand to 2025.
An Early Warning System for
Landslides in Alaska

A hard rain was rattling against the rooftops of Sitka, Alaska, as day broke on August 18, 2015. A city building inspector, William Stortz, watched the deluge and decided to run out to a new subdivision to check the drainage. Two brothers, Ulises and Elmer Diaz, headed that way, too, to finish hanging sheetrock in a new house there.

Just before 10 a.m., a hillside gave way. A river of mud, rocks, and broken trees surged down the slope and crashed through the subdivision. It took search crews several days to recover the bodies of Stortz and the Diaz brothers.

The landslide changed how people in Sitka looked at the steep hills all
around them. It made them a little more fearful every time the rain picked up. In that, it was a harbinger of what many communities can expect as the climate shifts and the natural world shifts with it.

But Sitka, a town wedged between ocean and mountains, accessible only by boat or by plane, was not about to become a victim of its circumstances now. Working with researchers from RAND and the Pardee RAND Graduate School, it set out to ensure that the next landslide would not take anyone by surprise.

Sitka residents didn’t need—or want—another siren to tell them to flee their homes for a landslide. What they needed was a simple way to monitor the risk for themselves.
The grief was still raw when the community meetings started. In a town of barely 9,000 people, the three men who died in the 2015 landslide were not just names in the newspaper. The Diaz brothers, former high school athletes, spent their afternoons mentoring kids on the basketball courts. Stortz’s obituary described him as “deep and steadfast and difficult to fathom.”

Sitka had always lived with the threat of a tsunami sweeping in from Sitka Sound. A piercing siren was the signal for residents to run; the hills were their refuge. Landslides happened; tribal nations in the area described them in oral histories going back generations. But until 2015, the biggest danger was thought to come from the west, from the sound, not from the towering wall of hills to the east. What can we know about the risk? people asked in those earliest community meetings. And then, What can we do?

Katie Whipkey, an analyst at RAND and a former AmeriCorps volunteer in Sitka, had been following the news. She pushed her colleagues to get involved. The Sitka Sound Science Center had put together a “geotask force” to start answering those community questions, and RAND signed on as a partner. It and the science center locked down a $2.1 million grant from the National Science Foundation to develop a landslide warning system with the community.

It seemed straightforward enough. The town already had a tsunami siren; it could just add a landslide siren. But it quickly became clear that would not work. Why evacuate the entire town when only a few houses might be at risk? Where would people go? And how would anyone know when to sound the alarm?

RAND researchers handed out copies of a graph at one of the community meetings. It showed historic landslide events plotted against daily rainfall totals. There was no obvious pattern—no straight line above which a landslide always happened, and below which a landslide never happened. They asked the community members, Where would you draw the line to start notifying people that a landslide could be coming? There was no consensus in the answers they got back.

They also started to notice that it was often the same people coming to those community meetings. A seam of distrust ran through the community, and many residents wanted nothing to do with the outside researchers who had flown in from the Lower 48. They knew the land. They didn’t need any help watching out for a landslide.

Max Izenberg started knocking on doors. He was a student at Pardee RAND; he had also grown up in New Orleans, so he could speak from experience about living with the threat of disaster. People would invite him in, hand him a beer, and explain why they didn’t want to get involved.

It was often a financial decision. If all these researchers showed just how high the risk was, they worried, their property values would plummet, their insurance rates would explode. One homeowner had tried to get a policy that would cover landslides shortly after the deadly 2015 slide—and had been quoted a rate of $1,200 a month.

Robert Lempert and Ryan Brown, RAND’s lead researchers in Sitka, heard those same concerns in their conversations with people around town. At one meeting, for example, they noticed an older man sitting in the back, listening but not speaking—not until the end. Then he warned the group not to forget the biblical story of Adam and Eve. It was a bite from the tree of knowledge, he said, that drove people out of paradise.

There was no way around those concerns, the researchers saw, except through them. They convened a series of workshops with community members to get their concerns out on the table and start talking about solutions. They attended town hall meetings and community coffee hours; project scientists gave presentations at Sitka schools.

The meetings and home visits started to pay off. In time, so many people agreed to participate that researchers could start to study how information travels in a small town like Sitka. They identified a few dozen “super connectors” who seemed to know everyone and could get the word out if a landslide threatened. They also identified groups of people who would be especially hard to reach in an emergency, including commercial fishing crews and hunters who vanished into the backwoods for days at a time.

The research team had planned to string a network of sensors along the hills above Sitka, to provide an early warning when conditions were shaping up for a landslide. But here, it got a lucky break.

Annette Patton, a member of the research team and a geologist at the University of Oregon, had been trying to figure out when landslides are most likely in Sitka. She pulled together 20 years of rainfall records from the National Weather Service and an inventory of historic landslides. There was no straight line in the data, she found—but there was an escalating gradient of risk. The key was not something hard to track like soil saturation levels. In Sitka, at least, it was three-hour bursts of very heavy rain.

Patton calculated that the risk of a landslide started to build when Sitka got .84 inches of rain or more in a three-hour
window. It became 70 percent certain at 1.3 inches. The morning of the deadly landslide in 2015, Sitka had seen more than 2 inches of rain between 6 and 9 a.m. That level of rainfall had never not triggered a landslide in the area.

Sitka residents didn’t need—or want—another siren to tell them to flee their homes for a landslide. What they needed was a simple way to monitor the risk for themselves, to help them make their own decisions about when it was time to leave.

Together, they and the researchers developed an online dashboard that shows three days of forecast rain, with color codes to signify risk. Yellow for those rare times, maybe once or twice a year, when a storm threatens that .84-inch threshold. Red for the much rarer times when rainfall pushes past 1.3 inches. The super connectors RAND had identified became preparedness ambassadors, trained to help people plan for when one of those red days comes.

“If we had taken another approach and hadn’t listened as closely as we did to community members who had so much at stake, we would have really missed the mark,” Izenberg said. “It’s really easy for people to come up with risk management solutions without understanding the human element of it. This is what it looks like when we don’t do that, when scientists and researchers incorporate and value local knowledge. It brings everyone closer to their goals.”

Sitka’s landslide warning dashboard went live this past summer. Several months before it was finished, a storm thundered into southeast Alaska. Researchers noticed rainfall amounts ticking closer to the yellow zone and notified the local weather station. It issued a warning along with the forecast, that conditions were shaping up for landslides. Sure enough, several small slides broke loose in the Sitka area that day. Nobody was hurt, and the property damage was minimal.

The research team is now working with the Central Council of the Tlingit and Haida Indian Tribes of Alaska to help six other small communities deploy sensors and develop warning systems for landslides, floods, and other hazards. They call the project “Khuti,” the Tlingit word for weather.

Jacyn Schmidt spent the summer talking to residents about the landslide warning dashboard from a table at the Sitka farmers market. She’s a regional geoscience specialist with the Central Council of the Tlingit and Haida Indian Tribes of Alaska, a member of the dashboard design team. And what she heard at the farmers market, above all, was gratitude. “A lot of research happens and doesn’t necessarily get back to the community in a meaningful way,” she said.

“It is helpful to look out your window, see it’s raining hard, and look at the landslide dashboard to see if conditions match with the higher risk levels,” she added. “If not, then I tend to go about my day. I don’t need to worry. I know that when conditions are there, the dashboard will signal that.”

FURTHER READING
Available for free download

A Community-Partnered Approach to Social Network Data Collection for a Large and Partial Network

Run Uphill for a Tsunami, Downhill for a Landslide

Efforts to End a Stalemate in Landslide Insurance Availability Through Inclusive Policymaking: A Case Study in Sitka, Alaska

Community-Level, Participatory Co-Design for Landslide Warning with Implications for Climate Services
Amplifying the Voice of Teachers

By Doug Irving, Staff Writer

At least 18 U.S. states have restricted how teachers can address topics related to race, gender, and “divisive concepts” in the classroom. A recent RAND survey asked more than 8,000 teachers how those restrictions—and the national debate around them—have affected what and how they teach.

Ashley Woo led the study. She brings to her research a teacher’s perspective, having taught elementary school in Los Angeles and Miami, Florida. But her interest in education goes back much further. As an undergrad, she volunteered as a tutor and music teacher in Berkeley and Oakland and worked with high school students from disadvantaged backgrounds to prepare them for college.

Her most recent survey sought to get inside the “black box” of how state-level teaching restrictions are playing out in the classroom. “Teachers are operating in this quickly changing landscape,” she said. “It’s so important that we capture, at this moment in time, what teachers are experiencing.”

Q: What were you hoping to add to the national conversation?
A: There had been so many headlines about culture wars and book bans and the politics of talking about issues like race or gender. We wanted to get a little closer to the ground and understand what is happening from the teachers’ perspective. How is this really influencing their instruction?

What did you find?

Teachers really varied. A lot of them were more careful and more cautious about how they approach these topics. Some were trying to find a middle ground, maybe talking about these topics but in a way that felt safer. And then we had teachers who were just outright resistant to the restrictions, saying “I believe these are really important issues for my students to learn about and discuss.”

We also saw a big difference in how Black or African-American teachers are experiencing these restrictions. We found that 41 percent of Black or African-American teachers in states that had enacted restrictions said that these restrictions are influencing their instruction. That’s much higher than for other teachers. There are national conversations about the need to diversify the educator workforce, so it’s important that we ask whether this is mak-
ing teaching harder for Black or African-American teachers. Especially given that we know that having teachers of color is really beneficial, not just for students of color, but for all kids.

One other significant takeaway was just how important the local community engagement piece is. We heard from teachers that they experience limitations from state leaders, district leaders, school leaders—but we really found that families and communities played a big role, too. Even if the legal, formal restrictions went away tomorrow, there would still be this pressure on teachers because a lot of it is coming from communities. It’s really important that we ask how we can continue to bring families into the conversation and do it in a way that is productive and civil and builds on a foundation of trust. At the end of the day, families and teachers have the same goal of wanting to make sure their kids are successful.

Did anything surprise you in the data?

The percentage of teachers who said they didn’t know whether their state or district had enacted restrictions. Even within the states that had, only around 30 percent of teachers said, Yes, my state has enacted restrictions. I interpret that as showing that a lot of teachers are having a hard time understanding these laws. It just speaks to the confusion of, ‘What am I allowed to do? What am I not allowed to do?’

How do you hope policymakers use this information?

It highlights the importance of understanding the perspectives of teachers and their experiences and their challenges. We’re in a time when many policymakers are worried about staffing shortages and making sure they have a qualified pool of people to recruit from and making sure there’s diversity in their educator workforces. I think they need to understand how restrictions might impact the working conditions and experiences of teachers, so they can better address those challenges.

You were a classroom teacher before you became a researcher. What stands out to you about the experience?

I taught second and third grade, and it’s such a sweet age to teach. Just helping kids learn how to love to read for the first time, being able to see those impacts, was deeply powerful. And then, also, just the relationships that you build with the people in the building with you. You’re all in the trenches together.

What made you come over to the research side?

I was looking for other ways to make an impact, and I saw that, as a researcher, I could take my experiences and try to understand how to best address the challenges that I faced as a teacher, and that I know other teachers face.

Is there a common thread in the research you do now?

The constant for a lot of my work is “teacher voice”—just trying to bring teachers’ perspectives into policymaking. Teachers on the ground really do face so many challenges, and so it’s important that we highlight their experiences and what they view as potential solutions. That’s one way we can try to make the profession feel a little more sustainable.
Violence Prevention in School

How School Leaders Can Support Students’ Willingness to Report Potential Threats

By Doug Irving, Staff Writer

People embrace outside Santa Fe High School in Santa Fe, Texas, after a shooting there in 2018.
The gunman was carrying a pump-action shotgun, a machete, and three Molotov cocktails when he pushed open the doors of his high school in Colorado and opened fire. He hit one girl, fatally wounding her, before turning the gun on himself.

His anger was no secret at the school. Classmates later described him as a “monster when he is mad,” ready to “snap one day.” But at least five students had another piece of information that they never reported before the shooting. They knew he had bought the gun.

Someone knew. That is one of the most consistent findings in research on school shootings: Someone knew an attack was possible and didn’t report it. A recent RAND study looked at how schools can better encourage students to come forward when they see or hear something that should concern them. Its top recommendations: tip lines, training, and a lot more trust.

“The main thing is making students comfortable reporting, ensuring they have somewhere they can go if they have concerns,” said Pauline Moore, a political scientist at RAND who led the study. “That was the underlying theme that we heard from almost everyone we talked to. If kids feel supported, if they have someone they can trust, they’ll come forward.”
Building a trusting environment

In 2021, the U.S. Secret Service published a review of 67 averted school plots. It found that in 94 percent of the cases, the would-be assailants had made their intentions known, often through comments to their friends or social media posts. Yet in more than two-fifths of the cases, people who knew of the threat failed to report it—even when it was a direct warning of what was to come.

Researchers at the Homeland Security Operational Analysis Center—a federally funded research and development center operated by RAND—have been working with the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency to develop tools and guidance to help make schools safer. Their most recent report provides a blueprint for schools to establish more-effective, more-responsive student threat reporting systems. It draws on decades of research on preventing school violence and interviews with three dozen people involved in school safety.

Researchers found that school climate is one of the best predictors of whether students will report a threat. Students who feel a strong connection to their school, a sense of belonging, are much more likely to come forward. Students who feel alienated or think they’ll cause trouble if they report a concern are much more likely to keep it to themselves.

That underscores how critical it is for schools to build a trusting environment where students believe their concerns will be taken seriously. That takes intention on the part of every teacher and staff member: chatting with students in the halls, going to sports games and other after-school activities. The schools that do it well, one district leader said, are those “with visible staff … who are sitting with students at lunch and greeting them at arrival.”

Tip lines

That’s the foundation of any successful school reporting system, researchers found—but it’s not enough on its own. Students still have to navigate hallways where speaking out is often seen as snitching, and keeping quiet is the easiest option. Several studies have identified that “code of silence” and fear of retribution as a significant barrier to student threat reporting.

Roughly half of U.S. states have established school tip lines in recent years to give students an option other than going to a teacher or administrator. Many allow students to submit a report without providing their name. The school officials RAND interviewed said that one feature is almost as important as establishing the tip line itself, given how deeply student concerns about being found out run.

Existing tip lines have also found that threats of violence are only one category of what students report when they have the chance. If anything, students are more likely to call in concerns about a friend talking about suicide, classmates using drugs, or their own experiences with bullying. Tip lines aren’t a cost-free option; it takes time and resources to follow up on those reports. “But the return on investment,” one school official told the researchers, “is life.”

Yet there is no single model that states or school districts can follow. Some tip lines route reports to law enforcement; others take pains to assure students that not every report will automatically involve a law-enforcement response. Many allow students to file a report by phone, but also by text or mobile app, an especially valuable feature given the target audience.

One of the first statewide school tip lines, Colorado’s Safe2Tell, is still cited as a gold standard. It started taking

A community ceremony commemorates the 17 students and staff members killed at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School on the five-year anniversary of the shooting in Parkland, Florida.
calls in 2004, a few years after the shooting at Columbine High School. It fielded its 100,000th report in December 2021—“100,000 times,” its director said in an annual report to the community, when “a young person felt comfortable speaking up to prevent harm.”

**Training events**

But even a gold-standard tip line isn’t enough, either. When that gunman stormed his high school with a shotgun and a machete in 2013, his classmates had the number for Safe2Tell in their pockets. It was on a sticker on the back of their student ID cards. But a subsequent investigation found no evidence the school had trained students on how to use Safe2Tell or what to report. Not one student called the tip line before the shooting, even though several knew the gunman had a hit list, a furious grudge against a teacher, and a gun.

Students often don’t realize the importance of the information they have, school safety officials told the researchers. They often wave off threats as a joke, or don’t want to get their friends in trouble. Breaking through that requires more than a poster on the wall or a sticker on an ID card. Schools should consider all-school assemblies, classroom presentations, and other regular reminders that every student has a responsibility to keep the school community safe. School officials told the researchers they often see an uptick in reports immediately following such training events.

An important part of that outreach is letting students and other members of the community know what happens to tips that get submitted. Several state-level tip lines publish regular statistical summaries that show, for example, how many tips were forwarded to law enforcement or how many were handled by crisis counselors. That provides assurance to students and the community that their concerns are taken seriously.

“It goes back to the need to make students more comfortable with reporting,” RAND’s Moore said—“to the notion that building a positive and inclusive environment is the main thing that has to happen to encourage reporting.”

Several states have started to enlist the students themselves to help get the word out. “It hits an adolescent differently [when they hear it] from a peer,” one school official said, “rather than from someone their parents’ age.” Colorado’s Safe2Tell, for example, launched a student ambassador program for high school students to raise awareness and help break the code of silence among their fellow students.

“There is a culture of silence; there is a stigma around reporting,” said one ambassador, a high school junior named Bella. She asked not to use her last name.

“A lot of students may be afraid that they’d be labeled a snitch,” she said. “They have to think of the bigger picture. They have to think long term—like, if I file this report, I’m going to help someone, protect someone. That’s going to be worth it, even if there is some temporary backlash.”

“Baby steps,” she added. “Just slowly changing the culture.”

Supporting Threat Reporting to Strengthen School Safety: Findings from the Literature and Interviews with Stakeholders Across the K–12 School Community is available for free download.
Foundation support is helping researchers find policy solutions to reduce gun violence.

More than 120 people are killed by guns every day in the United States. Many more are affected by gun violence. But how do we solve the problem? What does the evidence say about gun laws in the United States?

The debate over gun policy in America suffered for years from the absence of reliable information about the effects of gun-related policies. RAND made it a priority to fill this vacuum, launching the Gun Policy in America initiative in 2018 to provide a shared set of facts that the public and policy-makers can use to develop fair and effective gun policies.

Initially launched with funding from RAND supporters, since June 2018 the Gun Policy in America initiative has been supported by a grant from Arnold Ventures. Foundation grants like this are a critical source of funding and are helping RAND expand gun policy research efforts and build the scientific evidence base needed to inform gun policy decisionmaking.

For example, a new RAND report, based on a review of thousands of studies, shows that child-access prevention laws reduce firearm homicides and self-injuries among youth. RAND researchers also found supportive evidence that stand-your-ground laws and “shall-issue” concealed-carry laws increase levels of firearm violence.

Decisionmakers are taking notice of RAND’s findings and contributions. The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation recently awarded RAND a $4.7 million grant to assess how firearm laws affect injury, death, crime, and other outcomes in communities defined by racial composition.

“This significant grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation is a testament to the trust leaders have in RAND’s findings and the respect for our long history of using objective analysis to address complex and often-controversial topics,” said Christine Lanoie-Newman, RAND’s senior managing executive director of Development. “This is an area where RAND can make—and already is making—a difference.”

RAND’s work has been followed by a resurgence in federal funding for firearm violence prevention research. Congress, whose limits on such research had amounted to an outright ban since the 1990s, has since 2019 allocated $25 million annually for new studies.

“We’re so grateful for the philanthropic support that has helped RAND not only fill a critical need—a gap in the evidence required to evaluate the effects of gun laws—but also reignite federal funding for research that we hope will help reduce gun violence and make our communities safer and more secure,” said Andrew R. Morral, senior behavioral scientist at RAND, leader of the Gun Policy in America initiative, and director of the National Collaborative on Gun Violence Research.
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