



## **Prepared Remarks of Celeste M. Malone, PhD, MS President, National Association of School Psychologists Hearing of Gun Violence Prevention Task Force, June 5, 2023**

Good afternoon. My name is Dr. Celeste Malone. I am a school psychologist, president of the National Association of School Psychologists, and professor at Howard University. I am grateful for your commitment to addressing the gun violence epidemic that continues to plague our country. I appreciate the opportunity to engage in this important dialogue and work together toward solutions that will both prevent gun violence and address the tremendous harm it causes to our young people.

School psychologists serve alongside other educators and families on the frontlines of safeguarding and promoting the well-being of our nation's children. NASP has long been a leader in advancing evidence based, comprehensive school safety efforts. Last year's passage of the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act was a step in the right direction, but under no circumstances should policymakers think it was enough.

Firearms are now the leading cause of death for children under the age of 19. Beyond the tragic loss of life, gun violence leads to devastating consequences for those who have been threatened with or injured by guns as well as those who hear or witness violence, know someone involved in gun violence, or live in fear that gun violence will reach one's community. Data suggest that public fear over school violence has deepened, and schools are no longer viewed as safe havens for our children. In many communities, gun violence is a regular—even daily—occurrence. Mass shootings—the most high-profile form of gun violence—have occurred in schools, movie theaters, grocery stores, hospitals, concerts, parks, parades, and houses of worship. There is no aspect of our society that is untouched.

Our country continues to grapple with a youth mental health crisis, yet the impact of gun violence is largely ignored when discussing the root causes of and effective solutions to the crisis. For our young people, exposure to gun violence is associated with higher rates of depression, anxiety, antisocial behavior, increased rates of suicidal ideation and attempts, and other mental health challenges. It can reduce one's motivation to learn, capacity to engage in academic tasks, or prevent one from attending school all together. The effects are cumulative with repeated exposure to gun violence leading to increased negative impact.

Without question the harms of both direct and indirect exposure to gun violence are enormous and increasing. This is an entirely preventable public health crisis, to which we risk losing an entire generation, if we do not approach prevention in a holistic and comprehensive manner.

Unfortunately, in schools, some of the most commonly implemented, albeit well-intentioned, efforts to prevent gun violence can exacerbate these negative effects. For example, while increased physical security may give the appearance of safety, it actually causes students to feel less safe, and can lead to increased discipline problems and engagement with the juvenile justice system, which disproportionately harms minoritized populations. The use of lockdown drills, including active shooter drills, can be an important school safety tool, but the frequency and manner in which they are conducted matter a lot. There is rising concern that the intensity and regularity of these drills harm student well-being and for some people the impact can be indistinguishable from experiencing an actual violent event.

Community violence, which disproportionately impacts communities of color, is much more common than school violence and is reality for far too many students and schools. We cannot ignore this bidirectional relationship. Our young people do not live in silos, nor do they leave what happens at home and in the community behind when they pass through the school doors. In many communities, children are exposed to gun violence as they travel to and from school. They carry this experience with them, just as they carry their school experiences home with them each night. Any effort to prevent gun violence must address the entire societal ecosystem and view schools and communities as interconnected systems.

As a professor at Howard University in Washington, DC, I have the privilege of mentoring and supervising school psychology students who are completing their practica and internships, many of whom are in the DC public school system. There has been a rise in gun violence across the city and I want to share with you some of what I have heard from my students. These experiences are likely not unique to the DC area and further emphasize the need for a comprehensive approach to violence prevention that is tailored to address the challenges of each community.

My students note that they have been in lockdowns in response to community shootings. Sometimes without the ability to alert family that they are safe or to know if their loved ones were victims.

It is commonplace for schools to offer crisis support in the aftermath of a school crisis, including school violence. Many of my students have had to provide crisis support and grief counseling in response to community gun violence within the school community including the loss of a student to gun violence.

I hear about their experiences of vicarious trauma. Howard University students come from neighborhoods and schools that are very similar to those in DC. For them, the impact of gun violence is more acute because of how they identify with the students they are serving.

Gun violence impacts everyone.

As I mentioned earlier, we need a comprehensive approach to addressing this public health crisis. I echo the call of Anna King from National PTA and I urge all policy makers to stop playing politics with young lives and work to pass common sense gun safety laws, including reinstating the assault weapons ban. Recent research has highlighted that more restrictive state-level firearm laws and lower rates of gun ownership are directly associated with lower rates of active shootings specifically in K–12 schools, but the impact of these policies on community violence is similar.

We can also help students utilize their natural protective factors, such as family, school, and social support system that can take many forms and which can mitigate the harm of exposure to gun violence. In schools, we can help students develop self-regulation and strong social emotional learning skills; promote a positive school climate; utilize effective and positive discipline policy and practice; and help students connect with positive adult and mentoring relationships both in school and the broader community. Critical to all of these efforts is equitable access to school psychologists, counselors, and social workers.