

‘Swatting’ Hoaxes Disrupt Schools Across the Country. What Educators Need to Know

False reports of school shootings pose real risks



By [Evie Blad](#) — September 21, 2022 ⌚ 8 min read



A family shares a tearful reunion after Thomas Jefferson High School in San Antonio, Texas, went into lockdown because of a false report of a shooting.

— Kin Man Hui/The San Antonio Express-News via AP

The string of false shooting reports that have disrupted schools across the country in recent weeks has renewed attention to school safety and communication protocols and prompted

the FBI and local law enforcement officials to investigate whether the incidents are connected.

Dozens of schools in states including Arkansas, California, Colorado, Florida, Missouri, Texas, and Virginia have gone into lockdown this month after local police received false calls about shootings in progress in their buildings.

While there is often a wave of unsubstantiated threats at the start of the school year, callers in these incidents often claim to be inside the affected building, sometimes citing specific room numbers or mentions of injured students, local media reports show.

The FBI has labeled the practice “swatting,” a term that refers to filing a false report with the aim of stoking chaos and provoking a large law enforcement response.

“There are some kind of sick people out there,” said Andrew Lavier, the principal of Alamosa high school in Alamosa, Colo. “I don’t know who would do that to a school.”

His school was disrupted by just such a false report this week. During last period Monday, a police officer ran into the building to respond to a specific classroom, which a caller connected to a shooting in the school. All he found were students startled by his sudden entry. Lavier, who had never had a lockdown at his school for any reason but a practice drill, ordered students to remain in their classrooms while police from multiple local agencies swept hallways.

It took about an hour before students could leave. And, at first, it felt like it could be a real attack, he said.

A surge in school swatting calls

The surge in swatting calls come alongside a wave of more typical events that spark school lockdowns: students issuing threats as pranks , reports of suspicious people near school buildings, and other false alarms.

“The FBI takes swatting very seriously because it puts innocent people at risk,” the agency

said in a statement to Education Week. “We will continue to work with our local, state, and federal law enforcement partners to gather, share, and act upon threat information as it comes to our attention.”

In the past, people who’ve used false emergency calls to summon police to other settings, like homes, have been charged with crimes like making false reports. In a 2017 case where a Wichita, Kan., police officer shot and killed an innocent man as the result of a swatting call, the caller also faced charges of manslaughter, a charge prosecutors later dropped as part of a plea agreement.

While school threats and false alarms often fail to make national news if they don’t result in actual violence, they can be a huge deal to school administrators, who must help students and families regain a sense of normalcy after hours of thinking they may be experiencing an unthinkable event.

“You have a lot of rapid response, anxiety and messages going out, people scrambling to find their kids,” said Amy Klinger, co-founder of the Educator’s School Safety Network, a safety consulting organization. “It’s happening much more than we think, and it’s having a much bigger impact.”

And the ensuing response can be dangerous. In San Antonio, Texas, Tuesday, distraught parents responded to a school en masse after they received a lockdown alert. Some physically struggled with officers outside, and one man punched his fist through a window to try to gain entry, the Associated Press reported. A call about a shooting was later deemed false.

In Alamosa, Lavier sought to regain a sense of normalcy the day after the false shooting report by holding a meeting to debrief with teachers. The school made counselors available to students who needed extra time to talk about their experiences. And Lavier and the responding officer went back to the classroom he had dramatically entered the day before to calmly meet with students and answer questions.

“I said, ‘Everybody is going to process this differently,’” Lavier said. “‘Let’s be cautious about people’s needs.’”

Swatting calls come in clusters

Schools often see an increase in shooting and bomb threats at the beginning of a new academic year, safety experts say.

Waves of copycat threats also tend to follow mass school shootings, like the May 24 attack at an Uvalde, Texas, elementary school, Klinger said. That's because conversations about school safety and worst-case scenarios often follow such events, and some students see threats as a way to tap into that attention.



An administrator attempts to quell a crowd of parents and family members outside Thomas Jefferson High School in San Antonio, Texas, after the school went into lockdown due to a false report of a classroom shooting.
— Kin Man Hui/The San Antonio Express-News via AP

It's unclear whether the recent swatting calls have come from students or from outsiders. Many of the calls seem to be made to clusters of schools in the same state on the same day, local news reports show. For example:

- Four Colorado school districts locked down or evacuated some schools Monday after local law enforcement received calls that shootings were taking place. Law enforcement

officials said they were working with the FBI to determine if the calls were connected.

- [In Florida](#), schools in Fort Meyers and Hollywood locked down Sept. 16 while officers searched hallways following false reports of shootings in-progress.
- Parents in [North Kansas City, Mo.](#), rushed to gather outside of their children's high school Sept. 14 as police responded to a call of a shooting with long rifles. Districts in Wichita and Topeka, Kan., reported similar calls, all of which were deemed false reports by responding law enforcement.

Police responded to Waco High School in Waco, Texas, Sept. 13 after a caller reported a shooting was in progress there. That same day, other Texas districts, including Houston, received similar calls.

Waco police aren't releasing many details about the call while they investigate the source, said Cierra Shipley, a public information officer. But the agency has been in contact with the FBI and with law enforcement in other affected communities as they probe a possible connection, she said.

The Waco report was unusual because dispatchers typically expect to receive multiple calls from the same location in the case of a school shooting incident, Shipley said. In this case, they received only one.

Officers quickly reported to the school and found that it appeared to be operating normally. Coordinating with administrators, they placed the building on lockdown while they searched hallways and parking lots. After they evacuated students, they searched an additional time so they could reassure parents and educators it was safe.

"It was just odd when we showed up, but of course we had to treat it like a real incident until we could determine that it was not," Shipley said.

In Colorado and California, some local law enforcement officials reported similar language used to report shootings in multiple districts. Some even came from callers who claimed to be in classrooms with specific room numbers that didn't actually exist.

Repeated false alarms can erode emergency readiness

Repeated lockdowns for reports of things like a suspicious person in the neighborhood can become routine to school staff, and that can diminish their sense of readiness in a real emergency, Klinger said.

A July investigation of the Uvalde shooting, for example, found that the app the district used to notify staff of building lockdowns didn't specify the reason for the precaution. The community, near the Mexico border, frequently locked down schools in response to nearby police pursuits of vehicles with undocumented immigrants. Uvalde schools responded to "about 50" such bailout incidents between February and May of 2022, the report said.

Schools should be specific when they direct a lockdown, telling adults as much as they can about the reason behind it, the nature of the threat, and what level of precautions to take with students, Klinger said.

Lockdowns prompt uncertainty, emotional reactions

More than [4.1 million children](#) experienced at least one non-drill school lockdown in the 2017-18 school year alone, the Washington Post found in a first of its kind analysis of news reports at the time. There is no more recent national data.

Swatting calls and other prank reports are particularly difficult because the nature of the situation is so unclear, leaving time for rumors and fear to build up on social media, administrators said.

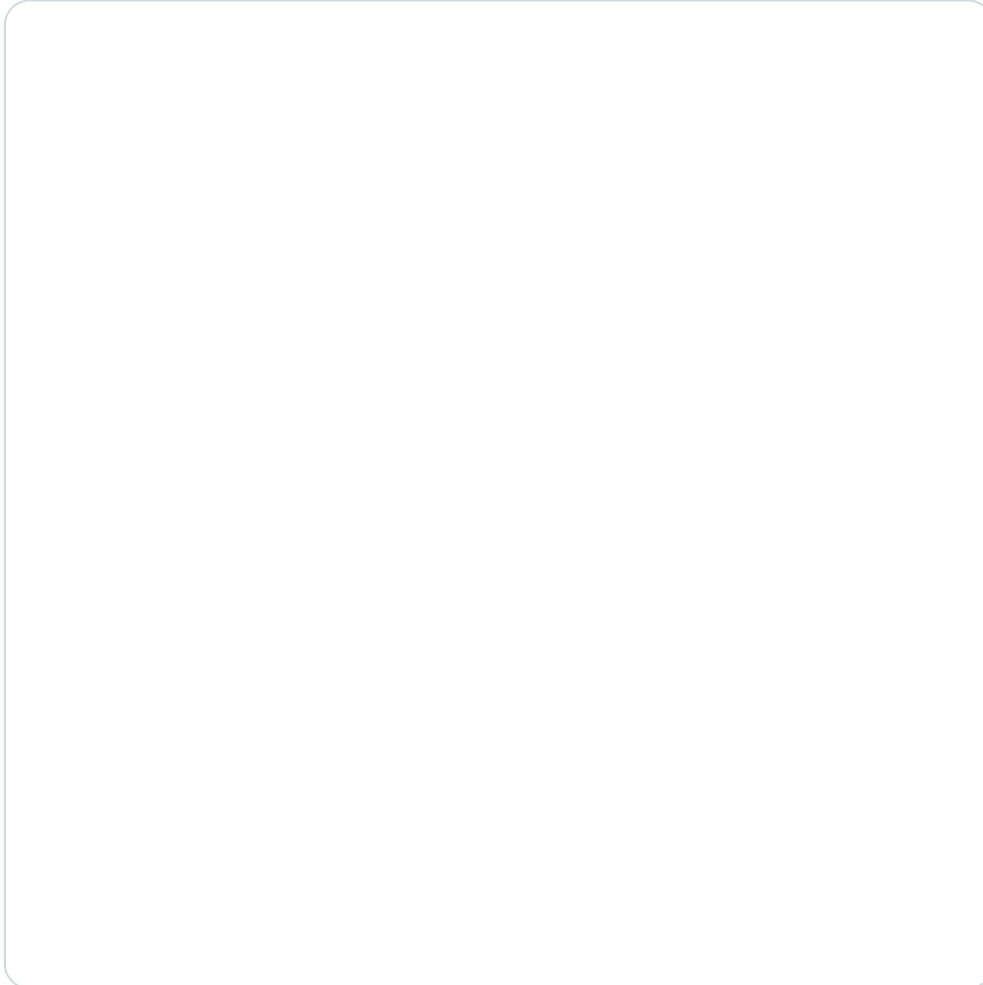
Postings from communities that experienced swatting lockdowns include "I love you" text messages students sent their parents from under desks, reports of parents running to school parking lots, and speculation about what was really happening.

Kristen Johansen

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My daughter started junior high just a couple weeks ago and was so excited about her new school and new friends. Yesterday somebody swatted the high school next door and the school was put on lockdown. They set off sirens, got the kids under desks, and they had police everywhere.



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This is the new reality for our kids who are just trying to learn and live another day!

There was an incident at Heights High School in Houston Texas and SWAT is going classroom to classroom

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Tips for school and district administrators

Klinger has advice for school and district administrators about preparing for and responding to lockdowns:

- Communicate with families about your school or district’s plan for lockdown events, how you will determine that a building is safe after a lockdown, and how you will communicate with families during emergencies. Include this information in routine places like back-to-school materials so parents can process it in a non-crisis setting.
- In a lockdown situation, communicate with families as clearly and specifically as possible about what precautions schools are taking and why. Use tools like mass texting systems to provide frequent updates.
- After a lockdown, provide teachers and staff ways to debrief about what worked and what didn’t. Use their feedback as an opportunity to improve emergency plans related to issues like building access, hardware, and plans to reunite students with their families.
- Educators may find it useful to debrief with students after a lockdown. They can review what procedures they used, how those procedures compared with drills students have done in the past, how students feel now, and how school leaders work to keep them safe. For example, [a 2021 Kentucky state resource](#) created with input from educators in Paducah and Marshall County— two districts that have previously experienced mass shootings— recommends “calm down” strategies that can be used after lockdowns or drills. That might include breathing exercises or asking students to “ground themselves” by naming things they can see, smell, and feel.
- In school safety trainings, be aware of the needs of students with disabilities, English-language learners, and students who’ve experienced trauma or violence. These students may need special attention to process a lockdown event.



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