

I. Executive Summary

The presence of gun violence in high schools has become a significant educational and public health issue, particularly when students and their parents need to evaluate the level of safety in their school environment, where children can attend school and learn daily (Rajan et al., 2022; Rapa et al., 2024). Recent research documented an increase in school shooting incidents throughout the United States, as well as the fact that mass shootings are not the entirety of a larger trend in school gun violence (Rajan et al., 2022; Rapa et al., 2024).

II. Abstract

Recent peer-reviewed journals described school gun violence as a multifaceted and dynamic issue that goes beyond occasional mass gunfire and involves a range of different categories of incidents in the school environment (Hamlin, 2025; Rajan et al., 2022; Rapa et al., 2024). National reports revealed a rise in school shootings over the past several years and also indicated that the pattern of incidents varies by context, school level, and type of violence (Hamlin, 2025; Rapa et al., 2024). The problem that this study addressed is the limited qualitative knowledge about how high school students and parents interpret safety from gun violence within their own school settings. National reports on recent school shootings indicated higher numbers and diverse types of school violence incidents, which suggests that mass shootings are not the only cases of school gun violence (Hamlin, 2025; Rapa et al., 2024). Literature lacks a qualitative study of the relationship between students and parents in the specific context of public high schools. Most recent studies were also based on national data, surveys, or stakeholder groups (Byrd et al., 2025; Dailey et al., 2025; Hamlin, 2025; Rapa et al., 2024). Those designs facilitate pattern identification, but they do not say as much about the lived experience within particular school communities.

The purpose of this phenomenological qualitative research study is to understand students' and parents' perceptions and attitudes towards safety from gun violence at the three high schools in St. Mary's County, Maryland. The study is grounded in the qualitative research paradigm, which is appropriate when the aim is to examine how participants interpret experiences, concerns, and meaning within a specific context. This study connects the identified problem of limited qualitative knowledge about school safety perceptions with a focused inquiry into one county-level public high school setting. The following research question will guide the study: What are the perceptions and attitudes of St. Mary's County, Maryland public high school students, and parents of students, pertaining to safety from gun violence in school?

The theoretical foundation for this study is adaptive leadership theory. Adaptive leadership theory aligns with this phenomenological qualitative study since perceptions of safety from gun violence involve a complex school issue that extends beyond security procedures alone. The adaptive leadership has been considered useful in the environment with uncertainty, divergent expectations, and collective problem-solving in recent scholarship (Chughtai et al., 2023; McKimm et al., 2023). The central phenomenon in this study is the lived perception and attitude of safety from gun violence in school. A phenomenological inquiry refers to a process of investigating perceptions, feelings, judgments, and interpretations, regarding a shared experience, which is how it was defined by Hartman and Squires (2024). In this study, the data will be collected using semi-structured individual interviews with high school students and their parents in the three high schools in St. Mary County, Maryland.

III. Introduction

The problem this study addressed is the limited qualitative knowledge about how high school students and parents interpret safety from gun violence within their own school settings. The purpose of this phenomenological qualitative research study is to understand students' and parents' perceptions and attitudes toward safety from gun violence at the three high schools in St. Mary's County, Maryland. This study examines how students and parents interpret safety from gun violence within the context of three public high schools in St. Mary's County, Maryland. The following research question guided the study: What are the perceptions and attitudes of St. Mary's County, Maryland public high school students, and parents of students, pertaining to safety from gun violence in school?

IV. Methodology

The most suitable methodological design in this study is a phenomenological qualitative design, as the study aims to explore the experiences of the participants, meaning making, and interpretation of safety due to gun violence in school settings. Instead of generating abstract theory or a superficial account of events, phenomenology is appropriate to questions that aim to provide detailed descriptions of lived experience and critical meanings that participants attribute to a common phenomenon, as defined by Moustakas (1994) and Tavakol and Sandars (2025). A quantitative approach was not chosen because the research is not aimed at testing hypotheses, estimating prevalence, or calculating a statistical dependency between variables. The surveys can only quantify the level of fear, trust, or perceived effectiveness or safety practices, but do not sufficiently describe how the students and parents contextualize the experience or how they give their responses meaning. The population for this study includes students enrolled in one of the three public high schools in St. Mary's County, Maryland, and parents or legal guardians of students currently enrolled in those schools. Participants will be recruited through criterion-based purposive sampling with maximum-variation attention across the three schools and the two stakeholder groups so that the sample includes individuals able to speak directly to the phenomenon of school safety from gun violence. As Czernek-Marszałek and McCabe (2024) noted, purposive sampling is appropriate when researchers seek participants who are especially well positioned to provide detailed and relevant accounts of a shared experience. Student inclusion criteria will require current enrollment in one of the three high schools, ability to participate in English, and either age 18 or older with self-consent or age under 18 with parental consent and student assent. The inclusion criteria of a parent will be that they must be a current parent or legal guardian of a student attending one of the three schools and be capable of participating in English. The exclusion criteria will be not being currently affiliated with one of the three schools, failure to complete an individual interview in English, failure to give consent or assent, or a direct evaluative relationship with the researcher. Interviews will be the main source of data since it directly answers the research question by asking the participants to give their descriptions of perceptions and attitudes toward gun violence safety, but the demographic questionnaire will provide the background information employed to explain the sample.

V. Research Findings

The data analysis followed the descriptive phenomenological analysis method, which specified reflexive bracketing, identification of significant statements, horizontalization, meaning-unit development, tentative theme development, and maintenance of an evolving codebook. The analytic approach was descriptive and inductive rather than theory-driven, meaning that the first cycle of coding remained close to participants' words before the findings were interpreted

through adaptive leadership theory (Tavakol & Sandars, 2025). The analysis generated six themes that described how the participants perceived safety related to gun violence in school.

Theme 1: Gun Violence Was Perceived as a Serious and Increasingly Normalized School Safety Threat. Gun violence was perceived as a serious and increasingly normalized school safety threat when participants described school shootings, firearm access, threats, and prior incidents as realities that could affect ordinary school life.

Theme 2: Perceptions of Safety Depended on Visible Protection, Weapon Detection, and Controlled Access. Perceptions of safety depended on visible protection, weapon detection, and controlled access when participants connected school safety to tangible safeguards that could prevent firearms from entering the school or support a rapid response if a weapon threat occurred.

Theme 3: Current Procedures and Drills Were Viewed as Necessary but Incomplete, Inconsistent, or Unrealistic. Current procedures and drills were viewed as necessary but incomplete, inconsistent, or unrealistic when participants described school safety protocols as important but not always sufficient to prepare students and staff for gun violence.

Theme 4: Communication, Reporting, and Phone Access Shaped Trust During Possible Threats. Communication, reporting, and phone access shaped trust during possible threats when participants described safety as reliant on whether students could report concerns, contact help, reach parents, or receive clear information during a lockdown or likely gun incident.

Theme 5: Gun Violence Concerns Produced Fear, Vulnerability, School Avoidance, and Survival Planning. Gun violence concerns raised fear, vulnerability, avoidance of school, and survival planning as the participants reported emotional distress or envisioned what they would do in case a gun threat happened in school. The theme was mentioned by 16 out of the 20 participants.

Theme 6: Participants Wanted Layered Prevention but Disagreed About the Best Safeguards. Participants wanted layered prevention but disagreed about the best safeguards when they recommended multiple solutions to minimize the risk of gun violence while also differing on which preventive measures would be safest or most suitable.

VI. Conclusion

Symptoms of anxiety have been demonstrated by adolescents exposed to school shooting concerns, and school shootings have been linked to an increased likelihood of skipping school due to perceived lack of safety (Hodges et al., 2023; Riehm et al., 2021). The parents' views on school safety policies depend on family-school connectedness and media exposure, which justify the inclusion of parent perspectives in the current investigation (Dailey et al., 2025). These conditions supported the need for a phenomenological qualitative study that examines how students and parents interpret safety from gun violence in three public high schools in St. Mary's County, Maryland. The study may have a social impact through results that could inform school communication, preparedness measures, and family presence, thereby promoting safer, more trusted schools.

VII. References

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