



**New Jersey State Police
Infrastructure Protection Unit**



**New Jersey Schools K - College
Infrastructure Protection
Series 2023 Spring Edition**

Overview:

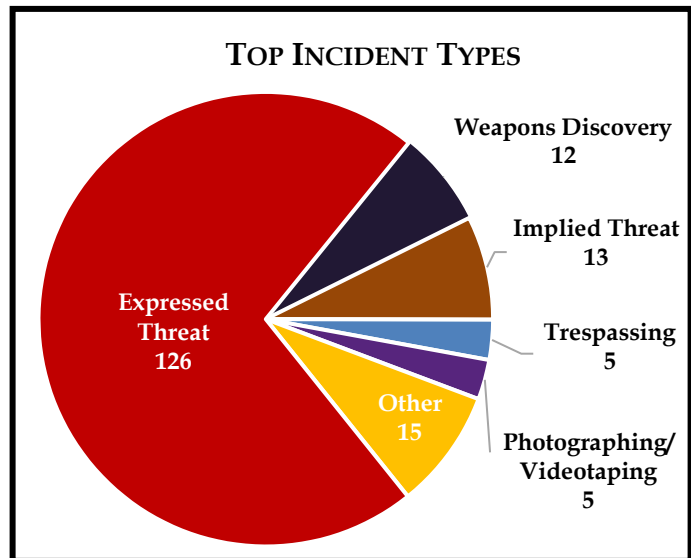
The New Jersey educational sector is comprised of multiple school districts supporting full spectrum learning within each domain. Depending on available resources, school security concerns are occasionally managed according to the district's understanding of perceived risks or active threats verses a sector-wide approach. This can lead to a lack of cohesive security measures and best practices not being employed state-wide. The purpose of this tri-annual infrastructure series product is to share with school administrators and education professionals, notable school critical incidents, school-based suspicious activity reporting, physical security protective measures and cyber security concerns. This state level, whole-of-government approach seeks to provide awareness of capabilities and resources to each respective district enabling a more uniform approach to mitigating threats. The recent targeted violence attack at the Covenant School in Nashville, TN continues to highlight significant concerns about the security posture in our educational institutions. School security solutions should be scalable and specific to each school.



School-Related Suspicious Activity Reporting (SARs):

New Jersey has received these school-related suspicious activity reports from [January 1, 2023, through March 31, 2023]:

- New Jersey received **223** school-related suspicious activity reports (SARs).
- Of the 223 SARs, **twelve (5 percent)** were pursued federally by the FBI/Joint Terrorism Task Force.
- The top counties with the most reported incidents were **Union (26), Monmouth (24), Middlesex (22), Atlantic (16), and Passaic (16)**.
- The municipalities with the most reported incidents were **Hamilton Township (Atlantic, 9), Elizabeth City (Union, 9), Wayne Township (Passaic, 7), Hamilton Township (Mercer, 6), and New Brunswick City (Middlesex, 6)**.
- The most common incident types reported were **Expressed Threat (151), Implied Threat (24), Weapons Discovery (17), Trespassing (8), and Act of Violence (5)**.
- The largest number of threats were directed at **High School (89)**,



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followed by Middle /Intermediate School (58).

- **Thursday** was the day most associated with incidents.
- **Snapchat** was the most frequently used social media platform.

Commencement and Graduation Ceremony Protective Measures:

As the school year nears its end, security planning for Commencement and Graduation Ceremonies will become the focus for school leadership. When planning enhanced security for these events, review the following protective measures:

- Increase uniformed law enforcement presence
- Issue tickets for ceremonies in advance to control event attendance. Utilize enhanced screening protocols for unfettered access by attendees
- Utilize identification systems for staff, students, and administrators during and after event
- Emphasize suspicious activity reporting to faculty, staff, students, and event attendees especially leading up to the event
- Ensure ingress/egress points are monitored during mass entry and exit

For additional Protective Measures Recommendations, access the 2015 New Jersey School Security Task Force publication.

Current Threat Environment:

The current K-College threat environment can be broken down into four major categories of issues: College/University Bomb Threats, School Shootings, Extremism, and Cybersecurity. These categories are representative of several ongoing and recent trends.

Threat Environment Overview:

Educational institutions continue to be attractive targets for violence due to their symbolic/shock value, the potential for broad media coverage, and the minimal level of security present at such institutions. Previous attacks have included the use of firearms, explosives, arson, chemicals, and edged weapons. In addition to physical acts of violence, schools continue to experience consistent hoax reports of school shootings and bomb threats. Although these threats are unfounded, they elicit the implementation of school lock downs, evacuation, and law enforcement response, effectively causing emotional distress amongst students, faculty, and parents and wasting valuable law enforcement resources.

- *Analyst Comment: Consistent with previous years, school shooters are most often associated with the targeted student body; however, it is important to note that foreign terrorist groups such as ISIS continue to call for attacks on children in Western countries—primarily in public places and/or educational institutions to produce a maximum societal impact.*

Recent School Shootings:

(U) According to the Gun Violence Archive, the number of school shootings and people injured or killed during these incidents was a record high for both categories. There were with 132 incidents reported causing 74 fatalities and 190 victims injured by firearms.¹

- (U) On Monday, March 27, 2023, a 28-year-old Nashville resident was killed by responding law enforcement officers during a targeted violence attack at the Covenant School in Nashville, TN. Six people were killed including three children. The shooter was armed with a handgun and two assault rifles when encountered by law enforcement. The investigation revealed that the shooter had a manifesto, and maps of the school documenting possible entry points into the school. The investigation is ongoing. ²
- (U) On Tuesday, March 21, 2023, a student shot and wounded two school administrators at East High School in Denver, CO. The student was required to be patted down based on previous incidents, including one where he brought a weapon to a different high school during the 2021-2022 school year. The student fled the school after the shooting and his body was discovered by authorities the following night. The motive for the shooting remains unknown. ³
- (U) On Monday, February 20, 2023, three students were killed, and five others were wounded before a 43-year-old gunman took his own life outside of Michigan State University. According to authorities, the shooter was previously on probation for a prior gun offense and had a history of mental illness. The motive in the shooting remains unknown. ⁴
- (U) On Friday, January 6, 2023, a 6-year-old student shot his first-grade teacher in Newport News, VA. According to the teacher's lawyer, the motive for the shooting likely stemmed from an incident in which the student broke the teacher's cell phone and was subsequently suspended for one day. The student returned to school the following day with a 9mm handgun and shot the teacher. The student is the youngest school shooter since the 1970s.⁵

Extremism:

Extremist groups operating in New Jersey such as the New Jersey European Heritage Association, Patriot Front, and Antifa continue to capitalize on current US economic, social, and political discontent to express their own grievances against minorities, immigrants, and others. As evidenced by increasingly visually appealing propaganda and other materials, these groups continue to use college and university campuses as propaganda targets to recruit young, educated individuals into their movements.

- (U) In May 2022, another member of "Terrorgram" uploaded a 14-page publication titled *Make it Count – A Guide for the 21st Century Accelerationist.* This publication focused on targeting critical infrastructure and several users commented on the visually appealing graphics featured throughout, citing that they would likely attract more members of "Gen Z."
- (U) In 2019, right-wing social media influencer and author wrote *Harassment Architecture*, a book written as fiction but filled with content presumably targeted towards young people who find themselves disenfranchised and without purpose. While the book does not contain specific mentioning on targeting schools, the general theme of accelerationism is referenced throughout and may be used as a recruitment strategy for young people. ⁶
 - *Analyst Comment: Accelerationism refers to a branch of Racially-Motivated Violent Extremism (RMVE) that believes in facilitating the total collapse and recreation of society.*

Cybersecurity and Social Media Concerns:

As in previous quarters, phishing, ransomware, and social media challenges continue to be three major concerns.

- Phishing campaigns targeting school staff remain prevalent and include schemes to obtain user credentials, change direct deposit information, or steal gift card funds. School personnel should be aware of phishing (general, non-targeted email) as well as variations such as spear phishing (email targeting a specific person/company, often from trusted sender), vishing (phishing by phone), smishing (phishing by SMS text), and pharming (phishing via fake URL).
- Ransomware attacks against school systems have evolved over the last several years to include threats to release student and staff information in addition blocking the school's access to its network data and resources. Novel ransomware continues to emerge on a consistent basis.
- Social media challenges, particularly those advertised on TikTok, continue to pose safety and security threats to students, faculty, and school property. Schools nationwide closed out of an abundance of caution. Most threats were delivered or proliferated online, predominantly through Snapchat, TikTok, Instagram, and video gaming platforms. Social media's ability to spread information quickly comes as a double-edged sword. While timely reporting is crucial in response and mitigation, the fast spread of information can lead to massive responses to unvetted and unfounded threats.

Cybersecurity Recommendations from the NJCCIC:

The New Jersey Cybersecurity and Communications Integration Cell (NJCCIC) profiled the IT security posture of over 100 school districts in New Jersey. Based on publicly available information of this sampling, New Jersey schools' most critical issues include failing to enforce HTTPS, supporting weak protocols, using outdated web browsers, and the presence of high severity vulnerabilities. The most common issues include the exposure of personal information and failing to implement web application attack protections. Threat actors could exploit these issues in various cyberattacks.

The education sector has been targeted in various cyber threat schemes and attacks in the past several years. Some of the most prevalent are social engineering schemes and predominantly phishing campaigns. The motivations behind these campaigns vary and include stealing account credentials, siphoning sensitive personal and organizational data, and pilfering funds. Gift cards purchases, direct deposit changes, document review and approval, and invoice payments are prolific lures used in these schemes. Given the requirement for transparency of public entities, information is readily available for threat actors to engage in more targeted attempts against K-12 institutions. User awareness and understanding of common tactics and techniques significantly reduces a school district's risk of falling victim to one of these malicious attempts.

In addition to social engineering schemes, the education sector is highly targeted by ransomware threat actors. Ransomware attacks may prevent school districts from providing instruction to students for days or weeks and lead to thousands of dollars in remediation and recovery costs. Ransomware incidents have prevented school districts from administering exams and inhibited

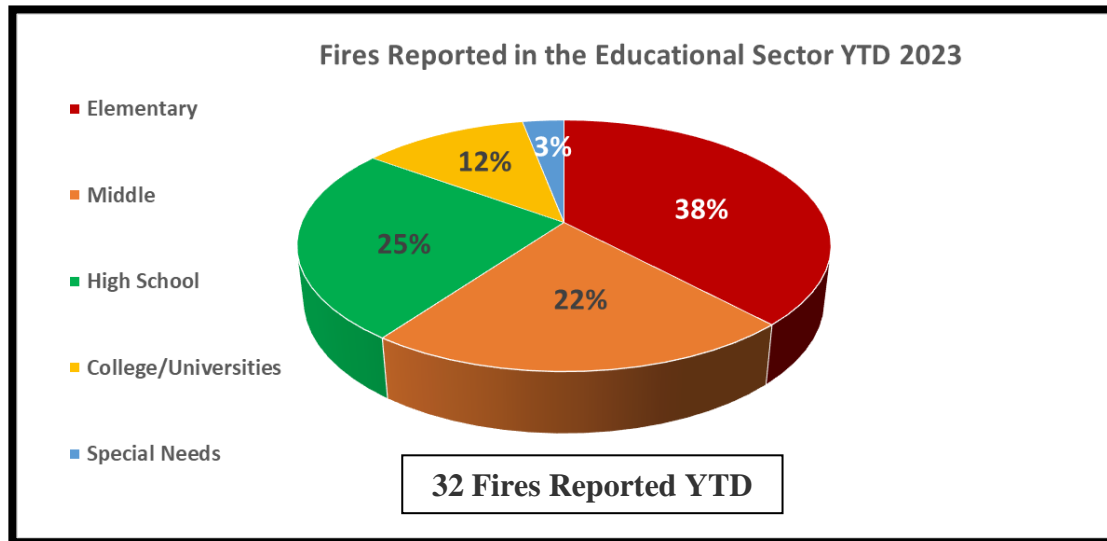
the ability for teachers and staff to provide a vital service to their students and communities. These incidents often originate from a phishing email sent to a district user who submits their account credentials on a fraudulent website. Once an account is compromised, it can be used to target and compromise other staff accounts, enabling lateral movement and privilege escalation, which provides threat actors additional network access. The ransomware infection precedes these compromises, but the impact can vary from a few hours to a few weeks post-compromise. Additionally, exploitation of a known vulnerability is also used as an initial attack vector.

New Jersey K-12 and higher education institutions are advised to follow security best practices identified in industry standards, such as the NIST Cybersecurity Framework or CIS Top 18 Critical Security Controls. These standards include implementing a defense-in-depth cybersecurity strategy, utilizing an endpoint detection and response tool, enabling multi-factor authentication for all user accounts, requiring user awareness training for staff, establishing and testing incident response plans, implementing a patch management policy that prioritizes remediation based on criticality and potential impact, and maintaining multiple data backups that are kept offline and tested. Establishing a means for staff to easily report suspicious emails can also assist network defenders in maintaining awareness of potentially malicious activity. Users are advised to avoid clicking links or opening attachments sent from unknown or unverified senders. Additionally, confirm any requests for information or the transfer of money by contacting the sender via a separate means of communication, such as by phone, before taking any action.

Unlike other networks, school networks are often more difficult to secure due to the wide userbase of faculty, staff, and students. As the use of technology within the classroom is increasingly required for educational purposes, more schools are implementing Bring Your Own Device (BYOD) policies, allowing students and employees to connect their personal computers, tablets, and mobile phones to their networks. Unfortunately, if BYOD is not implemented with proper security controls in place, schools could be exposing their networks and sensitive data to an increased risk of compromise created by vulnerable and infected devices.

The NJCCIC can provide many no-cost services and resources to the education sector in New Jersey to help bolster cybersecurity and reduce cyber risk. Please reach out to njccic@cyber.nj.gov or visit cyber.nj.gov. Additional resources: Ransomware: Risk Mitigation Strategies, Cybersecurity Essentials, and Cybersecurity Resources for K-12

2023 YTD Statistical Fire Analysis in the Educational Sector:



Highest Reporting Counties: Mercer (6), Gloucester (4), Bergen (4), Union (3)

Cause of Fire(s): Electrical (8), Arson/Incendiary (7), Accidental (6), Paper Products/ Trash (6)

Estimate of Property Loss/Contents Loss: \$292,457.50

New Jersey Department of Education:

The U.S. Secret Service National Threat Assessment Center (NTAC) and the U.S. Department of Education recommended schools create threat assessment teams and procedures to prevent targeted violence in school communities, prompting Gov. Phil Murphy to sign legislation on August 1st that requires the State's public, charter, and renaissance schools to establish such teams. The NTAC research reveals that "red flags" or warning signs were present in almost all acts of kindergarten through 12th-grade targeted violence. The New Jersey Department of Education's Office of School Preparedness and Emergency Planning is encouraging school staff, teachers, coaches, school board members, local law enforcement, mental health practitioners, and other community members to attend the General Awareness virtual sessions. The two-hour General Awareness sessions provide an overview of behavioral threat assessment and management in schools, including risk factors, triggers and stressors, and warning behaviors that could impact an at-risk individual's decision to commit an act of targeted violence.

- Monday, May 8 from 10 AM - 12 PM
- Tuesday, June 6 from 10 AM - 12 PM
- Monday, June 12 from 6 PM - 8 PM
- Monday, June 26 from 5 PM - 7 PM
- Friday, July 7 from 10 AM - 12 PM

These sessions, provided through the U.S. Department of Justice's Bureau of Justice Assistance Students, Teachers, and Officers Preventing School Violence Act Grant Program, are for awareness

purposes and do not replace “[Basic K-12 Behavioral Threat Assessment and Management Training](#).” Questions can be directed to OSPEP at school.security@doe.nj.gov or 609-376-3574.

Resources:

1. [New Jersey Department of Education’s Office of School Preparedness and Emergency Planning](#)
2. Active Shooter Preparedness and Response:
<https://www.njhomelandsecurity.gov/active-shooter-response>
<http://www.dhs.gov/active-shooter-preparedness>
3. Threat Assessment in Schools – Guidelines by the US Secret Service and the US Department of Education: <http://rems.ed.gov/docs/ThreatAssessmentinSchools.pdf>
4. Campus Safety - US Department of Education: <https://www2.ed.gov/admins/lead/safety/campus.html>
5. NJ Attorney General Directive Reporting Threats of Violence Against Schools: <https://nj.gov/oag/newsreleases18/pr20180326a.html>
6. New Jersey Office of Homeland Security and Preparedness School Safety and Security Resources: <https://www.njhomelandsecurity.gov/back-to-school>
7. Patron Screening Best Practices Guide: <https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/patron-screening-guide-03-16-508.pdf>

Sources: Intelligence Community Reporting, Open Source Reporting

Source Reliability: Reliable

Dissemination: Law Enforcement, NJ DOE, NJ School Officials

Contact Information: Any questions about this product should be directed to the Office of the ROIC Infrastructure Protection Unit at (609) 963-6900 ext. -6292 or NJROICIPU@njosp.org

Suspicious Activity Reporting: SARs with a possible nexus to terrorism should be reported immediately, per existing protocols. Activity can also be reported to NJOHSP's CTWatch at **866-4SAFENJ (866-472-3365)** or tips@njohsp.gov.

Special Events Reporting: NJOHSP compiles a statewide list of special events to be distributed to all law enforcement agencies to provide situational awareness. Officials can submit a “Special Events Submission Form” via <http://www.njhomelandsecurity.gov/special-events-submission-form>.

¹ (U) [Michigan State shooting live updates: 3 dead, 5 wounded after rampage \(usatoday.com\)](#)

² (U) [March 27, 2023 Nashville Covenant School shooting news \(cnn.com\)](#)

³ (U) [Denver school shooting suspect brought weapon to previous school, sources say - ABC News \(go.com\)](#)

⁴ (U) [Michigan State shooting live updates: 3 dead, 5 wounded after rampage \(usatoday.com\)](#)

⁵ (U) [Exclusive: Virginia teacher Abigail Zwerner sprung into action after being shot: 'I just wanted to get my babies out' \(nbcnews.com\)](#)

⁶ (U) [Harassment Architecture by Mike Ma | Goodreads](#)