

RESEARCH
BRIEF

Making Campuses Safe

Emerging Threats,
Technologies, and Solutions

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Making Campuses Safe

Emerging Threats, Technologies, and Solutions

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Contact CI@chronicle.com with questions or comments.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



The nation's higher-ed institutions are doing a good job of keeping campuses safe and secure, while maintaining strong relationships between security personnel and stakeholders on and off campus, according to an online survey of college leaders, including campus-safety directors.

But the survey, conducted by *The Chronicle* and underwritten by AT&T, found that those institutions are facing increasing pressures to deal effectively with emerging and growing threats to their campuses' safety and security.

More than 400 college administrators completed the survey, which was designed to assess their views on a wide range of safety concerns, including campus crime and extreme weather events. They were also asked to share their views on technology's role in maintaining safety.



Colleges are keeping their campuses safe amid a turbulent sea change. Long gone are the days when a few trained security personnel would patrol campuses to deter crime, intervene, and write reports. Keeping today's colleges safe and secure requires an ongoing redefinition of those terms.

The task now entails a host of departments and programs to handle a growing contingency of concerns and threats — everything from protecting people during political demonstrations to guarding against ransomware attacks to preventing a mass shooting.

And campus-security departments are doing their part at a time when their presence in certain places, or whether their officers should be allowed to carry guns, is often [questioned](#). While [parents often call](#) for more security on campus and off, many student groups worry about police bias that can result in the law being applied inequitably to members of some ethnic, gender, and racial groups.

Amid that swirl of growing demands and differing perceptions of how they should do their jobs, campus police and safety leaders are often asked to do more without new money or more staff. As they try to make do with tight budgets, colleges are competing with law-enforcement agencies of all kinds for recruits during [a time of scarcity](#). Too few officers are available to meet the needs of institutions that can afford to hire them, experts say.

Many colleges are turning to technology to fill some staffing voids and to better protect against threats. Emerging artificial-intelligence technologies that can identify people carrying firearms, monitor campus-security cameras for threats, or read license plates offer the promise of making institutions safer.

Not all tech solutions have been well received. Institutions must balance putting new digital tools to work against concerns about AI-based discrimination, as well as data and privacy worries.

To handle other concerns, colleges are doubling down on human resources. A nationwide mental-health crisis, worsened by social isolation and other stressors that culminated during the Covid-19 pandemic, has overwhelmed many institutions, including colleges.

In a [2022 study](#) of 54,000 undergraduates by the American College Health Association, 77 percent reported experiencing psychological distress. More than one in three reported a diagnosis of anxiety, 30 percent said they had experienced suicidal ideation, and 27 percent said they were depressed.

[Research](#) conducted over the past two decades has tracked a stark rise in mood disorders among adolescents. Many of those adolescents are now on campus.

College police forces have been asked to respond to more and more non-crime cases involving troubled individuals. But how they do so has changed. Many institutions have responded to the crush by devising new strategies to provide students and staff members with a variety of campus professionals who can offer more kinds of help, including counseling and referrals.

Multidepartmental units — often called crisis-response or behavioral-intervention teams — typically include campus-security workers and mental-health professionals. Their goals include de-escalating tense situations and connecting people with support and services.

Institutions now emphasize prevention, some by strengthening their responses to campus suicides. Several colleges and systems, including the University of California, also feature [handbooks](#) written for faculty and staff members to alert them to the academic and behavioral indicators that might signal mental-health problems in students.

Amid that swirl of growing demands and differing perceptions of how they should do their jobs, campus police and safety leaders are often asked to do more without new money or more staff.

Such measures have been taken not only to help people in trouble but to pre-empt mass shootings, which have typically occurred after a distressed student takes up arms. “Our research shows mass shootings are often a form of suicide driven by despair,” notes [The Violence Project](#).

Colleges [experienced](#) 13 mass shootings — defined as four or more murdered people in each incident — from 1966 to 2023, resulting in 102 deaths. Even though relatively rare, mass shootings can traumatize a campus for years, and the specter of such a tragedy casts a long shadow.

Since the 2007 shooting at Virginia Tech, in which a gunman killed 32 people and injured 23, [many](#) colleges have worked to improve their emergency-response and prevention efforts, as well as to provide a more holistic response to troubling behavior.

Meanwhile, crime and mass shootings are not the only threats on the minds of campus leaders. As the ravages of climate change continue to mount, many institutions’ security operations are more focused on preparing for extreme-weather disasters. Colleges have responded to damaging events such as Hurricane Sandy, in 2012, by creating a national intercollegiate mutual-aid [group](#) to share emergency-response expertise, resources, and services across state lines.

The 800 institutions that make up another group, the [Disaster Resilient Universities Network](#), can share messages and real-time information to help one another deal with weather emergencies.

Some institutions, including the University of Texas at Austin, maintain [web pages](#) and text-alert systems to inform staff members and students about severe-weather events and what they should do during one. Around a dozen colleges have hired their own meteorologists to help them prepare for weather emergencies.

In general, colleges spend a lot more time watching the weather, even as they remain focused on a host of concerns: crimes on campus and in the digital realm, safety during speeches and demonstrations, and the needs of people in the throes of mental disorders.



YOUNG

HELP

Safety on a Tight Budget

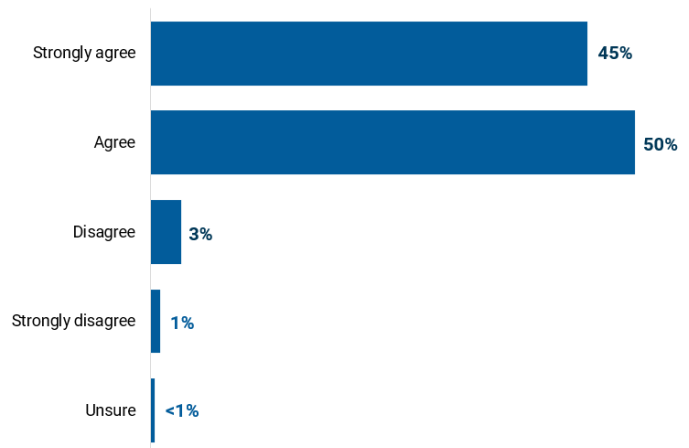
Even though [crime](#) is down nationally, a [perception](#) lingers that it represents a growing problem. But campus leaders don't face that issue, according to survey results. Nearly all (95 percent) say that their campuses represent a safe and secure environment. What's more, 91 percent of college offi-

cial say that students and faculty and staff members see their campuses as safe. And nearly all officials (92 percent) say their police maintain good relations with people on campus.

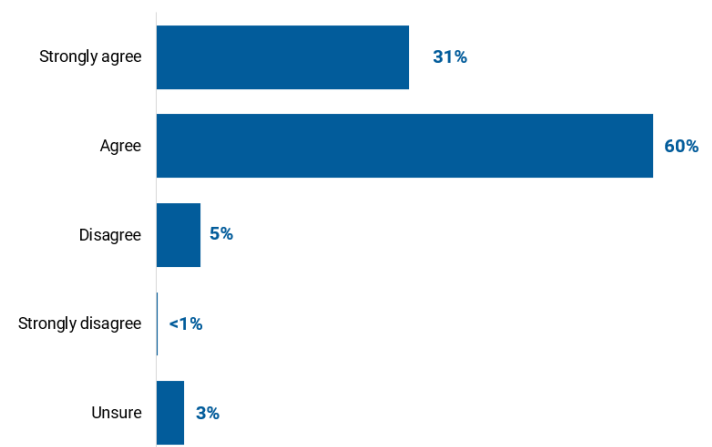
A majority (68 percent) says that the crime rate on their campuses stayed about the same last year as it did the previous one, with 8 percent reporting a decline. Only 39 percent of campus leaders say they worried more about campus crime in 2023 than in 2022. Parents, as well as students, faculty, and staff members, mostly did not express more worry about crime last year than in 2022, according to campus officials who responded to the survey.

While those assessments might reflect well on the job that campus police officers are doing, some observers question whether other campus stakeholders

**How much do you agree with the following statement?
"My institution does a good job of creating a safe and secure campus environment."**



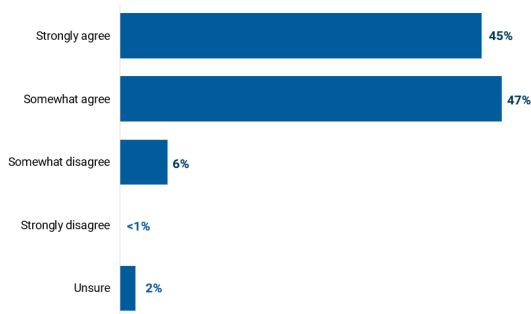
**How much do you agree with the following statement?
"Students, staff, and faculty say that the campus is a safe and secure environment."**



Source: Chronicle survey of 407 campus officials
Note: Percentages do not total 100 percent due to rounding.

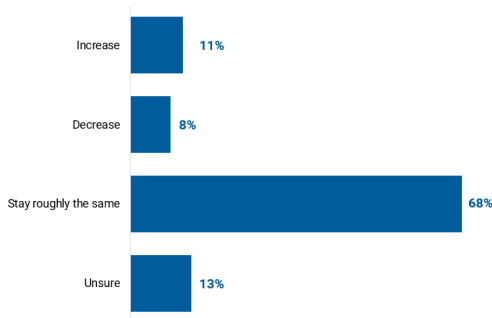
How much do you agree with the following statement?

“The campus police and/or security officers have a good relationship with the campus community.”



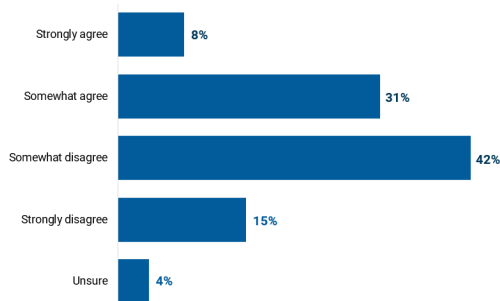
Note: Percentages do not total 100 percent due to rounding.

Compared to 2022, in 2023 did reports of crime on your campus...



How much do you agree with the following statement?

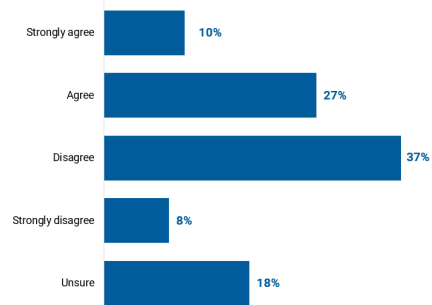
“I worried more about campus crime in 2023 than in 2022.”



Source: Chronicle survey of 407 campus officials

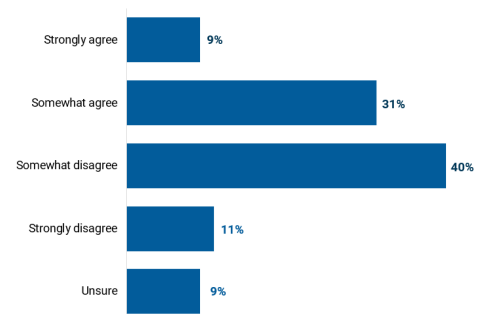
How much do you agree with the following statement?

“Parents of students expressed more worries about campus crime in 2023 than in 2022.”



How much do you agree with the following statement?

“Students, faculty, and staff members expressed more worries about campus crime in 2023 than in 2022.”



Source: Chronicle survey of 407 campus officials

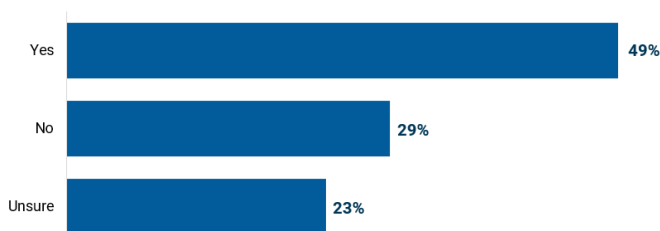
would rank their institution's safety operations as highly as college leaders do.

"Those kinds of numbers don't reflect all of what we're hearing," says Steven Healy, chief executive at The Healy+ Group, a higher-ed security-consulting firm, which has interviewed more than 5,000 students about campus safety since 2020. "Are colleges using data that show that people do, in fact, feel safe? Or is it a gut feeling? While some data shows that students feel safe, when we have peeled back the layers of the onion during our research, we

see that students — particularly those from underrepresented groups — often say they don't feel safe," he says.

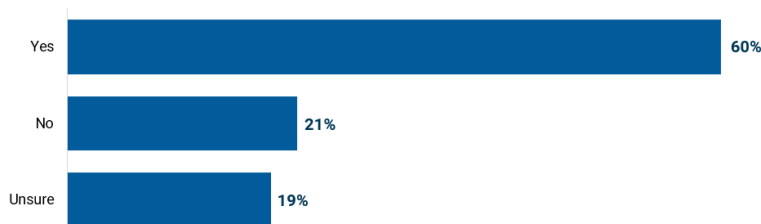
Contrary to the survey's results, students often say they lack any kind of relationship with the campus police, Healy adds. Some student groups have called on colleges to rein in their police forces or disarm them. What's more, recent campus demonstrations over the Israel-Hamas conflict have left some student groups feeling vulnerable, even fearful. "Psychological security is lacking," Healy says.

In 2023, did your institution take new steps to prevent thefts, assaults, or other crime on campus?



Note: Percentages do not total 100 percent due to rounding.

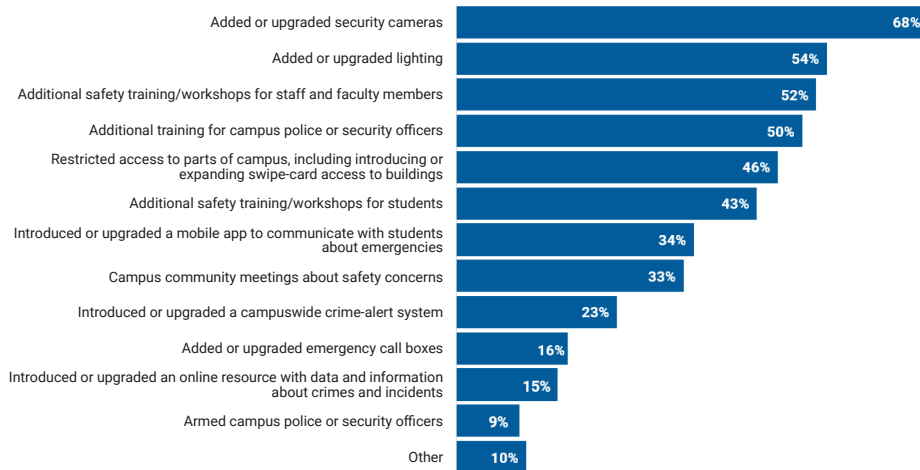
In 2023, did your institution work more closely with the local community and/or local law enforcement to prevent crime on campus and in its surrounding neighborhoods?



Source: Chronicle survey of 407 campus officials

“While some data shows that students feel safe... we see that students — particularly those from underrepresented groups — often say they don't feel safe.”

**What did those steps include?
Choose all that apply.**



Source: Chronicle survey of 407 campus officials

Note: Only respondents who answered “yes” to the question: “In 2023, did your institution take new steps to prevent thefts, assaults, or other crimes on campus?” were presented with this question.

About half of colleges (49 percent) took new steps in 2023 to prevent assaults, thefts, and other crimes on campus. A majority (60 percent) of colleges over all worked more closely last year with local communities or law-enforcement agencies to prevent crime on campus and the areas around it, officials say.

Healy has seen more of his firm’s clients reach out to local agencies and police forces. Often the coordination helps them prevent and solve more crimes.

“We have a great relationship with local police. We can count on their expertise.”

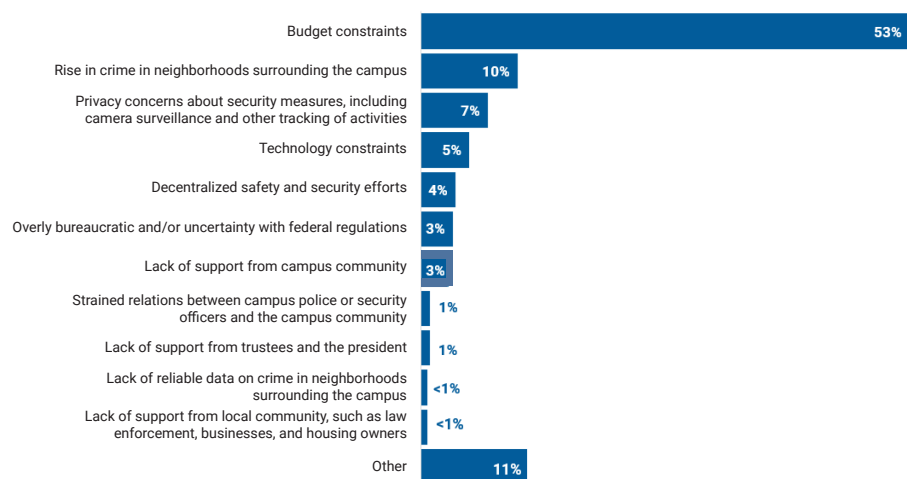
“It can lead to good results,” he says. “Colleges have to measure taking on those relationships against students’ calls to avoid local police, who they say don’t always deal with students fairly and equitably.”

Colleges held more joint meetings and workshops with the local police or worked more closely and shared resources with them, respondents say.

At the University of Southern California, safety leaders use their strong relationship with the Los Angeles Police Department to push back against crime levels that are creeping up toward higher pre-pandemic levels, mostly due to a spike in bike and scooter thefts.

“We have a great relationship with local police,” says Laretta Hill, assistant vice president and chief of public safety at USC. “We can count

What is the biggest barrier to improving the safety and security of your campus?



Source: Chronicle survey of 407 campus officials
 Note: Percentages do not total 100 percent due to rounding.

on their expertise. We often hire their officers on a part-time basis to supplement our own force.”

Like many campuses, USC has had a hard time identifying and recruiting full-time police officers. Forces around the nation are in competition for a small pool of would-be applicants. Public-safety departments, like many units on today’s campuses, face budget worries that make hiring even more difficult.

When asked which among 11 barriers to improving campus safety and security represents the biggest threat, more than half of college leaders (53 percent) selected budget constraints. No. 2 was a rise in crime in neighborhoods surrounding campus, at 10 percent.

“We have to increase salaries just to hold on to the police we have,”

says William E. Hudson Jr., vice president for student affairs at Florida A&M University. “Every other police force is hiring. Fortunately, here we have leadership that makes safety a priority.”

A historically Black university, Florida A&M doesn’t have much choice but to continue maintaining its costs to remain safe, Hudson says. It, along with several Black colleges nationwide, has faced an [increase](#) in racist threats in recent years. Last year a [gunman](#) roamed the grounds of Edward Waters University, another HBCU, before fleeing the campus and carrying out a mass shooting in Jacksonville, Fla.

“We’re always on high alert, because we always have had to be,” Hudson says, citing racially motivated bomb [explosions](#) on the Florida

“We’re always on high alert, because we always have had to be.”

A&M campus in 1999. The university regularly applies for federal and state grants with which to fund its security operations. “We’re always looking to make the campus safer. That includes spending money on more technology and people.”

Colleges that can’t swing a bigger security budget often take a variety of steps to cut costs while maintaining campus safety. Besides collaborating more with the police

from areas around campus, institutions can use more technology, and change how they respond. At USC, armed officers now no longer handle fire alarms and other low-threat calls for service, and the university has encouraged students and others to file reports online, freeing up officers to do other work, says Hill.

Still, Healy advises his college-security clients to develop stronger arguments for buttressing their budgets. “A lot of times, the efforts they make aren’t all that sophisticated,” he says. “They need to make a business case for more resources, one that lets their leaders know what the outcomes would likely be if they get more money, and if they don’t.”



Mass Shootings, Mental Health, and Extreme Weather

The rarest, most deadly, and potentially most damaging crime — a mass shooting — remains a concern for campus-safety directors. Nearly half of those surveyed

(49 percent) say they worried more about the potential for a mass shooting on campus last year than in 2022 — slightly more than the 46 percent who didn't.

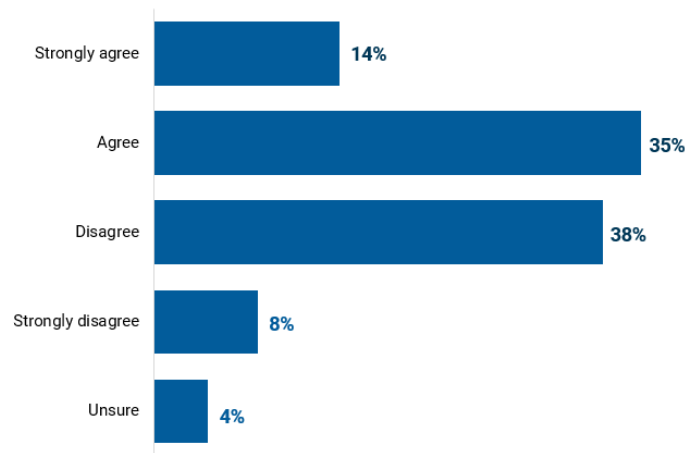
Forty-six percent of campus leaders who responded to the survey say that students, faculty, and staff members expressed more concern about a mass shooting in 2023 than in 2022, compared with 40 percent who felt that they didn't.

More colleges (45 percent) than not (37 percent) took new steps to prevent gun violence and mass shootings. Among the measures most cited in the survey are additional training or workshops for faculty and staff members (77 percent), more training for the campus police (56 percent), active-shooter drills for staff and others (55 percent), and additional training for students (52 percent).

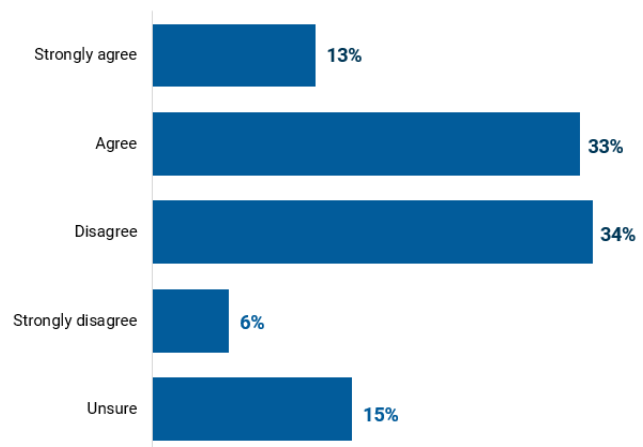
Some observers say survey results show that the level of concern regarding mass

shootings remains constant. "It's something that's always in the front of our minds," says Anthony Morgan, chief of public safety at Bucknell University, in Pennsylvania. "I actually think people may be more worried than those results reflect."

**How much do you agree with the following statement?
"I worried more about the potential for a mass shooting on campus in 2023 than in 2022."**

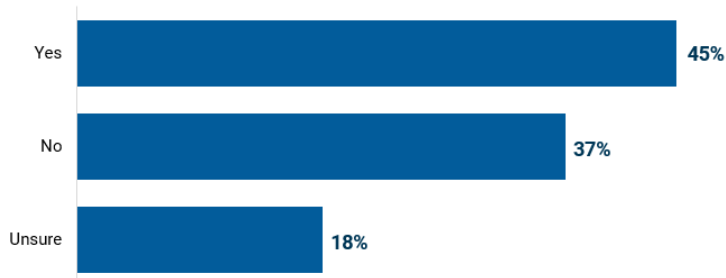


**How much do you agree with the following statement?
"Students, faculty, and staff members expressed more worries about the potential for a mass shooting on campus in 2023 than in 2022."**

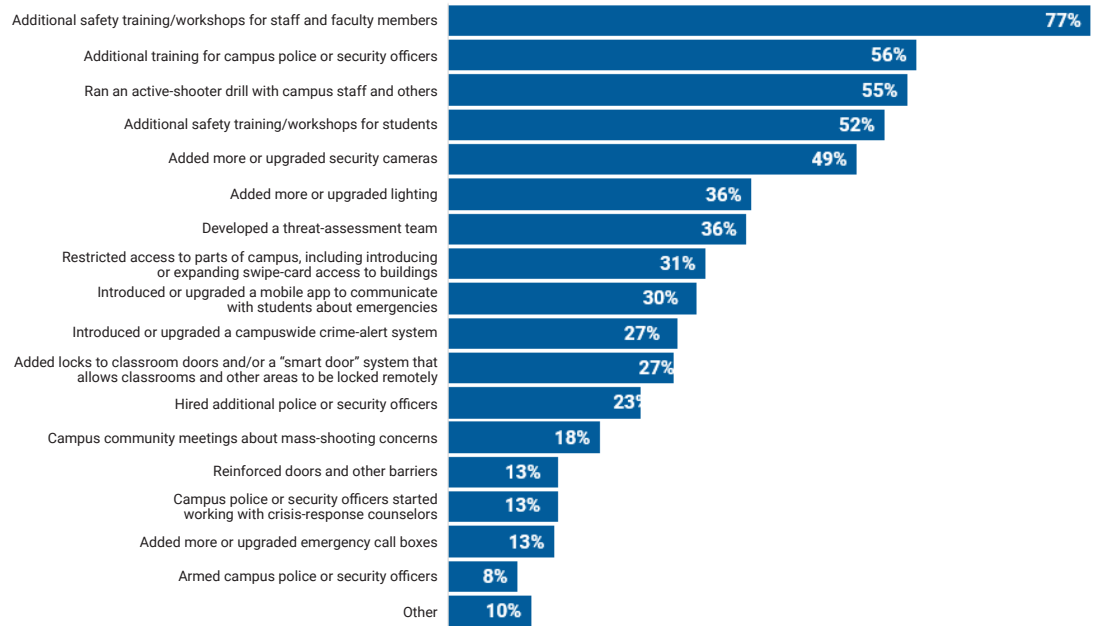


Source: Chronicle survey of 407 campus officials
Note: Percentages do not total 100 percent due to rounding.

In 2023, did your institution take new steps to prevent a mass shooting or other gun violence on campus?



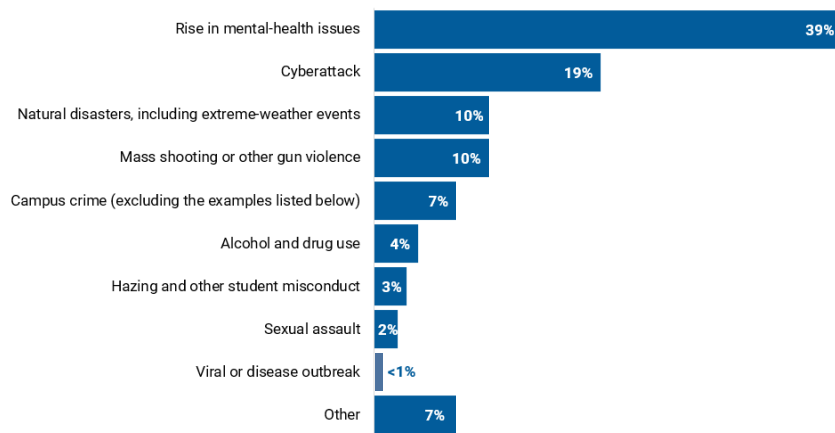
In 2023, did your institution take new steps to prevent a mass shooting or other gun violence on campus?



Source: Chronicle survey of 407 campus officials

Note: Only respondents who answered "yes" to the question: "In 2023, did your institution take new steps to prevent a mass shooting or other gun violence on campus?" were presented with this question.

What is the biggest threat to the safety and security of your campus community in 2024?



Source: Chronicle survey of 407 campus officials
Note: Percentages do not total 100 percent due to rounding.

Like many other institutions, Bucknell has consistently upgraded its training and technology to prevent and plan for mass shootings. Its top leaders and outside experts now help Morgan and his staff devise strategies.

“We all have to be worried enough,” Morgan says. “We need to stay on top of this because if an incident occurs, it can take years and years to get through it.”

The most important step colleges can take to forestall a mass shooting is to identify and help students with mental-health concerns, say Morgan and others. A rise in mental-health problems was ranked as the biggest threat to the campus community in the survey, at 39 percent. Seven other options drew responses of 19 percent or less.

The link between suicide and mass shootings has been borne out by research, says Kurt Michael, senior

clinical director at the Jed Foundation, an organization that works to prevent suicide by teens and young adults. “Much of what’s behind that 39 percent cited in the survey is a concern about suicide,” Michael says.

Only 10 percent of respondents say that mass shootings or other gun violence represent the biggest threat to campus security, Michael notes, even though 90 percent of suicides involving guns are fatal.

A few institutions have begun offering responsible gun storage for students who have permission to carry them, he adds. Studies show that having a gun locked away can prevent suicides.

The threat of self-harm has led many institutions to make other changes, including how their parking garages are built, Michael adds. Many now include safeguards that prevent people from jumping. Many

colleges are more mindful of locking entrances to the roofs of academic and administrative buildings.

But beyond those safety measures, many face challenges in providing students with care. “More students see the value in caring for their mental health, but many can’t get access to services,” says Michael.

“Mental health has become a leading security issue for colleges because no one else is handling it. As a society, we’re failing.”

Mental-health care is a nationwide issue that college campuses are forced to respond to. Young people, whose brains are not fully developed until age 25, often come to campus with mental-health problems. The stress of college life, especially in an age of social media and [increasing loneliness](#), may force others to wrestle with emotional problems during their college careers.

Yet, as in other segments of society, support is hard to find. “The response to mental health everywhere is lacking,” says Ravi S. Rajan, president of the California Institute of the Arts. “The mission of colleges

is to educate, but we’ve been asked to add the capacity to deal with students’ mental health. Mass shootings are the result of not having a comprehensive approach to mental health. Many politicians will say they support more mental-health services, but they won’t pay for it, and here we are.”

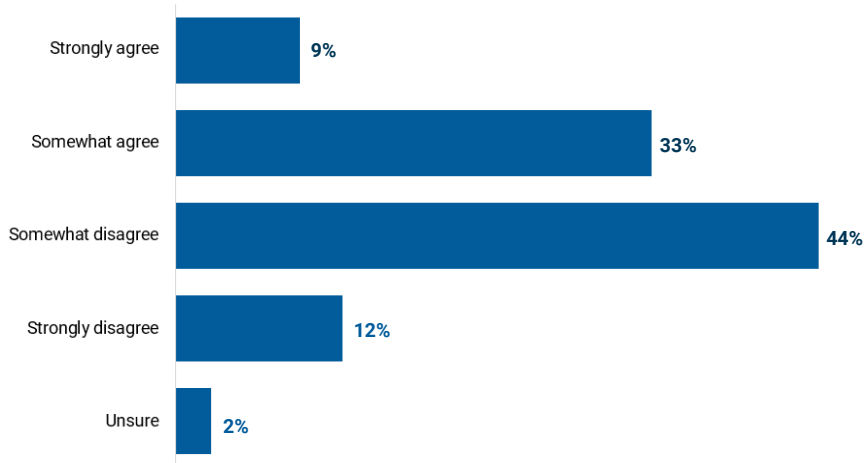
College security personnel are often asked to respond when such services are lacking — either on their own or as part of behavioral-threat assessment teams that can offer students counseling referrals.

“Mental health has become a leading security issue for colleges because no one else is handling it,” says Michael E. Schirling, chief safety and compliance officer at the University of Vermont. “As a society, we’re failing.”

At the same time, the global community has been forced to deal with the unpredictable events that come with climate change. As with mass shootings, college-safety directors (and emergency-preparedness officers) have been concerned with floods, tornadoes, and other weather calamities for years.

Forty-two percent of survey respondents say they worried more about potential extreme-weather events in 2023 than they did in 2022. Those results almost exactly mirror the percentage of campuses that faced an extreme-weather event last year (43 percent). Despite that, only one in three say their

**How much do you agree with the following statement?
“I worried more about the potential for extreme weather affecting campus in 2023 than in 2022.”**

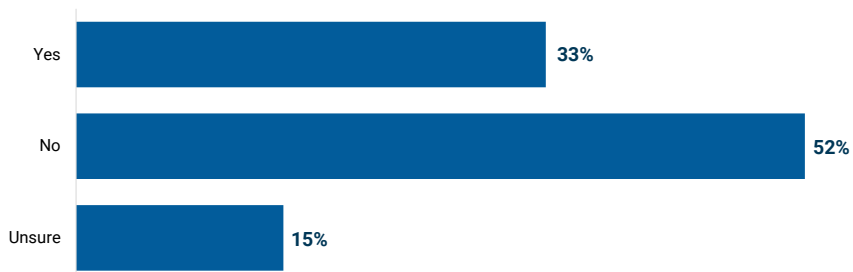


Did your campus experience an extreme-weather event in 2023?



Note: Percentages do not total 100 percent due to rounding.

In 2023, did your institution take new steps to prepare for an extreme-weather event affecting campus?



Source: Chronicle survey of 407 campus officials

campus took new steps to prepare for such events.

Observers see the results as evidence that campuses remain concerned. “The survey represents a consistent level of worry,” says David J. Hubeny, executive director of emergency management at Binghamton University, part of the State University of New York. “That level has been high for years.”

As climate change intensifies, Binghamton faces more tornado warnings and watches each year, as well as actual snowstorms that are rarer but more intense. To prepare for them, Hubeny and an emergency-preparedness team meet each Monday with local agencies and a local National Weather Service forecast center. Each year his team plans “functional exercises” to simulate what might happen during a weather event and devise a response.

But others say the survey’s results more closely reflect a lack of experience with destructive weather events. “There are institutions that haven’t ramped up preparedness and response measures because they haven’t had their disaster yet,” says

“There are institutions that haven’t ramped up preparedness and response measures because they haven’t had their disaster yet.”

Kevin Kloesel, university meteorologist at the University of Oklahoma.

Located in the middle of “Tornado Alley,” Oklahoma has tapped Kloesel’s expertise to increase its vigilance. The university routinely uses weather radar and other data from the National Weather Service and Kloesel’s office to change the timing of campus events.

Oklahoma has changed kickoff times for its popular football games — but not canceled them — due to weather threats.

“We regularly have conditions that are favorable to tornadoes,” Kloesel says. “If we can home in on the window of time when there is minimal risk, we can change the time or day of an event. We usually find a way to get them in.”



An Openness to Tech Solutions

A

strong majority of respondents (87 percent) say technology plays an increasing role in keeping their campuses safe.

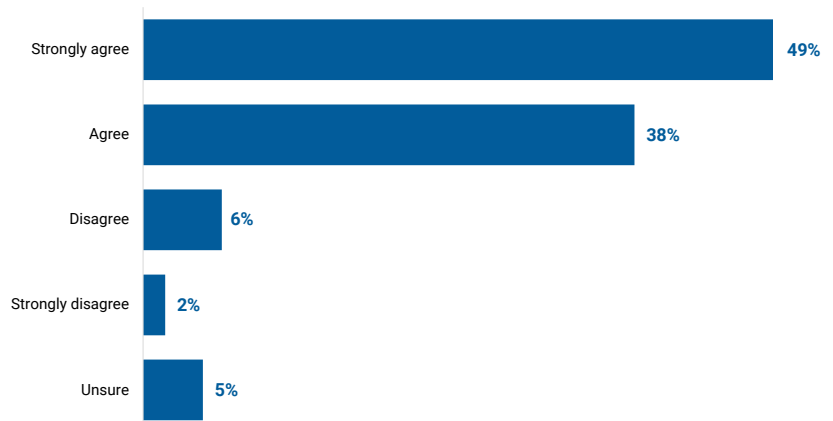
Last year, 68 percent of campuses added or upgraded security cameras, while 54 percent added lighting. (Please see chart, page 13.)

Many colleges use advanced lighting systems and security cameras to deter crime, two-way communication apps to report it, and alert systems to relay information campuswide. Other institutions feature access-card systems that allow safety officers to secure buildings in the event of a disturbance, or license-plate readers that can give them a heads-up about potential threats to campus.

But technology doesn't come cheap. Even the maintenance and upgrading of some platforms can be cost-prohibitive, says Morgan, from Bucknell. Campus security leaders say they must select technology that doesn't bust their budgets — and forget adding the rest.

“We have strong plans for dealing with those emergencies, but do we always have enough resources to buy technology for water diversion or generators for those buildings? Anything we'd recommend has a cost attached to it, and it's often a high one.”

How much do you agree with the following statement?
“Technology plays an increasing role in keeping the physical campus safe and secure.”



Source: Chronicle survey of 407 campus officials

“If we could, we’d buy more threat-detection systems that can tell us when people have weapons or are moving toward some kind of violent encounter,” Morgan says. “We’d expand our access-control system, so we’d have the capacity to lock down the entire campus. But there’s a price tag that comes with each of those things.”

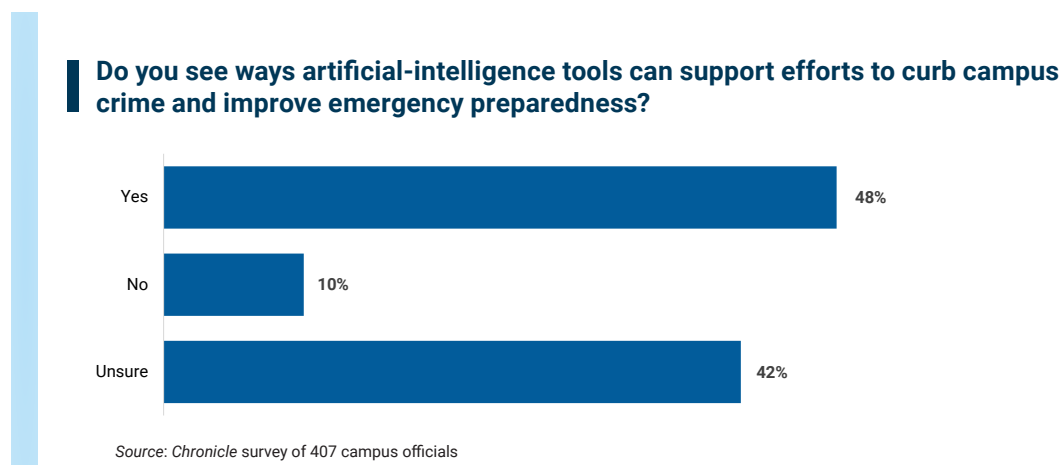
The same goes for technology that could help Bucknell, situated on the banks of the Susquehanna River’s west branch, plan for and recover from weather disasters. Half of the campus sits in a flood zone. Some students have been evacuated from dorms during severe storms.

“We have strong plans for dealing with those emergencies, but do we always have enough resources to buy technology for water diversion or generators for those buildings? Anything we’d recommend has a cost attached to it, and it’s often a high one. When a campus has all these competing priorities, how do you pay for it?” Morgan says.

Still, observers say that tech use by campus-safety forces will probably increase. For one thing, the privacy concerns of student groups and others about surveillance tools have eased a bit in recent years, observers say. Security cameras once seen as intrusive are much more likely to be accepted. For another, artificial intelligence may soon make it easier — and less expensive, in the long run — to monitor the hundreds of cameras some campuses maintain.

Nearly half of respondents (48 percent) say they see ways that artificial-intelligence tools can support efforts to curb campus crime and improve emergency preparedness.

Some tech companies are beginning to tout artificial intelligence as a solution to the high cost of paying people to monitor surveillance cameras. Human beings are not mentally equipped to watch live video monitors for long stretches. It can be expensive to maintain a cadre of people with fresh eyes to scan them.



“I could put 500 cameras on a campus, but if no person or AI is monitoring those cameras in real time, it won’t stop crime,” says Healy, the security consultant.

“You could never have enough eyes to monitor all of those cameras,” adds Morgan. “There are plenty of concerns, but AI is a force multiplier. It could help us operate much more efficiently. More people are getting out of the security business, and officers from elsewhere aren’t starting second careers patrolling college campuses. We could use the help.”

Still, there is some uneasiness, or at least some uncertainty, about using AI to support campus safety. In the survey, 42 percent report being unsure about putting it to work on their campus.

Some campus-safety directors are disturbed by the negative potential of AI, including its tendency to “hallucinate” in the absence of data, the proliferation of “deepfake” videos and images, its tendency toward gender and racial bias, and its usage by criminals who attempt to fool people into losing money or hurting themselves.

“Cyberattacks will go up with AI,” says Schirling, from Vermont. “AI can become a headache on campus because of scams. Machine learning can lead to more cyberthreats and hacking, as bad actors learn how to manipulate both large systems and individual devices. In some ways, mental health and the

Institutions would do well to prepare people on campus for new security technologies. That would include explaining to them how they are exposed to AI, what the benefits and risks are, and what factors convinced the college to go ahead with installing them.

cyberattacks/AI issue are becoming intertwined. Disinformation, misinformation, online scams, and the effects of social media on mental health will only grow worse with AI.”

Institutions would do well to prepare people on campus for new security technologies, Healy says. That would include explaining to them how they are exposed to AI, what the benefits and risks are, and what factors persuaded the college to install them.

“If you’re going to introduce AI, you need to be transparent,” he adds. “You need to explain to people the steps you’re taking to protect them. Students could be on camera hundreds of times per day, monitored by machines that collect and compare data. You need to show them why that needs to happen.”

CONCLUSION

College leaders strongly believe that police and security personnel are doing a good job of protecting their campuses. They also say that other stakeholders — faculty and staff members, parents and students — feel that their institution is secure, and that safety officers have a strong relationship with the campus community.

But they also face growing challenges. Even during a time when officials say campus crime has remained flat, they must deal with a years-long rise in mental-health issues that has reconfigured how colleges handle troubled students. Many institutions remain vigilant and prepared to deal with mass shootings and extreme weather.

College-safety officers are beset by budget and staffing worries. Finding the resources to handle such a wide range of security problems and situations will probably affect whether colleges can adopt new security-focused technologies.

Ongoing concerns about racial bias in AI, as well as the prospect for more illegal activity, such as cyberattacks, on campus systems, so far counterbalance the benefits of any long-term cost savings AI might have for campus-safety operations.

As colleges navigate these multifaceted challenges, ensuring the security and well-being of the campus community will continue to require a comprehensive, continually evolving strategic approach.

METHODOLOGY

The Chronicle's survey was emailed to college leaders and campus-safety directors across the United States from January 22 to February 12, 2024. Four hundred and seven people, equally divided between private and public institutions, responded. College vice presidents (33 percent) represent the largest group. Other positions represented are directors (20 percent), chancellors/presidents (13 percent), other administrators (12 percent), deans at all levels (10 percent), provosts at all levels (9 percent), and department heads (4 percent).



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