



Article

Effectiveness of School Violence Prevention Programs in Elementary Schools in the United States: A Systematic Review

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Abstract: School violence remains a major concern for scholars, policymakers, and the public in the United States. Despite the implementation of various school violence prevention programs, information regarding their effectiveness in the United States is outdated and limited. This systematic review identified current elementary school programs that effectively reduce school violence in the United States and determined the types of elementary school violence prevention programs implemented, their effectiveness, and the types of tools used to enhance such programs. A qualitative methodological approach was employed, and four databases were searched. English articles published between 2012 and 2023 were selected. Furthermore, data involving elementary school education, school personnel, teachers, and children (5–12-year-old) in the United States were included in the thematic analysis. Results confirmed that the school-wide Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports program effectively decreases violence, suspensions, office referrals, and disruptive behaviors, whereas positive action effectively reduces negative violent behaviors. Social-emotional learning (SEL) implementation also reduced behavioral issues. The findings of this study are relevant for guiding teachers, school administrators, policymakers, teacher education preparation programs, and health professionals in constructing evidence-based violence prevention programs with an added SEL component for elementary schools.

Keywords: school violence; prevention programs; elementary schools; bullying; aggression



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1. Introduction

School violence refers to violent and aggressive acts committed on a school campus (Kennedy 2021). Furthermore, school shootings are defined as criminology phenomena that emerged in the 1990s where gun violence takes place in the school setting against other beings and is exclusive to children (Holt 2017). Most recently, Serbia was left in a state of shock after a seventh grader allegedly fired and killed eight children and a security guard at Vladislav Ribnikar Elementary School (Picheta et al. 2023). In the last 4 years, Brazil has experienced 17 school attacks, in which 26 were killed and dozens wounded (McCoy and Dias 2023). China, where guns are outlawed, had over 100 children killed in schools by knives or blades in the last decade (Sarkar 2022). While no country is immune to the tragic occurrences of violence within educational institutions, the United States has faced a unique challenge in grappling with the frequency and scale of such incidents. This country has witnessed a series of high-profile mass school shootings, such as Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, and Robb Elementary School in Uvalde, Texas, which all captured international attention and prompted widespread calls for action. These violent acts have sparked debates on gun control, mental health support, and school safety measures worldwide. Unfortunately, these debates and discussions do not often lead to change or action, and in rare cases where action is implemented, the measures do

not achieve the desired effect (Mosechkin and Krukovskiy 2019). With such terrorizing acts taking place within schools across the globe, researchers are calling for experts such as criminologists, social workers, and criminal justices to be included in the commentary and discussions explaining school violence, shootings, the aftermath, and ways to prevent similar occurrences within schools (Reinsmith-Jones et al. 2015). Recognizing both the shared global concern and the nuanced responses to school violence can guide lawmakers, experts in criminology, and educators in formulating effective appropriate strategies to safeguard students' well-being. Hence, this study aimed to research programs and strategies that effectively prevent and reduce cases of school violence.

2. Literature Review

School shootings are a common topic presented in the news regularly. School shootings are not limited in terms of where they takes place. School shootings occur in urban, rural, and suburban areas (Reinsmith-Jones et al. 2015). Furlong and Morrison (2000) defined school shootings as violent and aggressive acts committed on school campuses. Twenty-five years ago, on 20 April 1999, twelve students and one teacher were killed by two students who attended Columbine High School. The students were Dyland Kiebold and Eric Harris, who carried guns and bombs into Columbine High School. The two students eventually took their own lives before wounding 23 people and killing 13 (CNN 2019). This was considered one of the “worst high school shootings in United States history” (Onion et al. 2019, p. 1). Investigations showed that the two teenagers randomly selected their victims and did not specifically target minorities, Christians, or athletes (Onion et al. 2019).

Additionally, another act of school shooting occurred at Sandy Hook Elementary School on 15 December 2012. This was considered another one of the deadliest school shootings in United States history (Kranz et al. 2018). The school shooting occurred in Newton, Connecticut. Adam Lanza, a 20-year-old man, walked into the elementary school and killed 26 people before turning the gun on himself. Of the 26 people killed, 20 were children and 6 were staff members. According to Katersky and Kim (2014), Adam Lanza had a history of mental health concerns such as depression, anxiety, and obsessive–compulsive behavior.

More recently, on 25 May 2022, Salvador Ramos, a resident of Uvalde, Texas, entered Robb Elementary School. It is believed that Salvador Ramos killed 19 elementary school students of ages 7–10 and 2 teachers (Hassan 2022). As he entered the school grounds on the last day of school, Salvador Ramos opened fire with two semi-automatic platform rifles that were purchased when he turned 18 years of age (Pagonis et al. 2022). Murphy (2022) reported that Salvador Ramos was described as a loner who was bullied over a speech impediment and experienced an undesirable home life. Additionally, he had few friends, was picked on for his clothes, and had chronic absenteeism while attending Uvalde High School (Murphy 2022).

The nature of school shootings has changed over time. Thomas (2005) asserts that there are lethal types of school violence such as school shootings with firearms that occur on school grounds. According to Boulter (2004), violent acts in schools include murder, theft, and aggravated assault with weapons such as guns and knives on school campuses. Boulter (2004) found that most school shootings have been committed by males, who also have a higher rate of being victims of school violence. Interestingly, the school shootings that occurred in Columbine High School, Sandy Hook Elementary School, and Robb Elementary School were all committed by males who were at one time bullied and/or had a history of mental health disorders.

While gun shootings in schools are considered rare and isolated events, they provide an account of the existing problem of school violence in elementary and secondary schools today. School shootings have led families, students, schoolteachers, and school personnel to fear for their safety in what should otherwise be a safe environment to learn. School shootings have fueled continued discussions on gun violence prevention and gun control initiatives including the involvement of social workers, policymakers, criminologists, and

other key stakeholders. It is unusual to have a high frequency of school shootings of such nature as compared to other acts of violence such as physical aggression, relational aggression, and cyberbullying, which can be experienced daily by students.

The current literature revealed three types of violence, namely, physical aggression, relational aggression, and cyberbullying (Fite et al. 2023). Disruptive behaviors such as pushing, fighting, beating, and throwing objects that are purposefully meant to cause harm or inflict pain on another individual define physical aggression (Ostrov et al. 2018). The use of hostile language, such as screaming, name-calling, and yelling, causing individuals to be hurt emotionally and discredited by the aggressor indicates relational aggression (Allen and Anderson 2017). Cyberbullying is a type of violence resulting from the increasing growth and usage of technology, such as online gaming, social media, and texting (Evangeliio et al. 2022). Cyberbullying is directly linked to cyber aggression (Hussain et al. 2023).

Recent initiatives such as Safe to Learn launched by the Global Partnership to End Violence against Children, the Together to #ENDviolence initiative launched by the World Health Organization, the Center for Prevention Programs and Partnerships awareness bulletin established by the United States Department of Homeland Security, and the recent bill (S.1285) School Shooting Safety and Preparedness Act prove that we can transform this crisis into an opportunity for growth, resilience, and positive change. Along with these initiatives, some government programs aim at reducing school violence. The Office of Justice Programs, an agency of the US Department of Justice, recently invested more than \$87 million in grants to fund school violence prevention programs, train personnel, and educate students to prevent school violence (Department of Justice 2020).

School violence also includes acts of bullying, which can be defined by the three types of violence, which are physical aggression, relational aggression, and cyberbullying. Wolke and Lereya (2015) defined bullying as the systematic abuse of power where the bully uses aggressive behavior to cause harm to others repeatedly. Rawlings and Stoddard (2019) found in their systematic review that implementing anti-bullying programs such as Steps to Respect, Bully Proofing Your School, and Positive Action effectively reduced bullying and peer victimization among elementary school children. This information is critical because victims of bullying can experience a decline in emotional well-being, health issues, a reduced joy of learning, and a lack of school connections (Meter et al. 2023). Furthermore, Bezerra Leite de Souza et al. (2021) reported that bullying interventions and peer social support offered at school demonstrated better outcomes in overall mental well-being, quality of life, and social functioning. Lastly, Calvo-Morata et al. (2020) revealed that incorporating digital technology such as games to show hypothetical bullying situations can enhance students' skills and self-efficacy when responding to bullying situations.

With ubiquitous technology in the 21st century, social media has penetrated elementary schools. Amid applications such as Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat, and X (formerly known as Twitter), cyberbullying has become more frequent among many elementary school children. According to the systematic review of Lim et al. (2023), programs used interactive games to counter cyberbullying were more successful than the traditional lesson-based approach delivered by educators. In a systematic study conducted by Calvo-Morata et al. (2020), video games had a positive effect on students aged 6–12 years by increasing awareness, creating empathy, and teaching new strategies on ways to counter cyberbullying. Lastly, a systematic review of 43 articles on cyberbullying intervention and prevention programs found that most of these programs effectively reduced cyberbullying and improved prosocial skills (Evangeliio et al. 2022). Overall, the literature review revealed that school violence prevention programs have proven to be effective in reducing negative behaviors among youth.

To address physical and verbal aggression, elementary schools have implemented programs such as Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS). PBIS provides proactive ongoing support for students with behavioral challenges to make better choices in a general education school setting (Kennedy 2021). Stakeholders such as staff and teachers create three to five behavioral expectations such as “be safe” and then teach lessons designed

to define the expectations with students; this approach effectively enhances academic and social behavior outcomes for students (Gage et al. 2020). A study involving 12,334 children from 37 elementary schools across the United States who participated in PBIS showed that these students were less likely to have disruptive and aggressive behaviors and 33% less likely to be sent for office discipline (Gage et al. 2020). A PBIS program called Kickboard was introduced to 965 students in Southeastern Texas from 2017 to 2018, and it had a significant impact in reducing office referrals and overall misbehaviors (Marshall 2018). Furthermore, Brunson (2023) reported that after implementing PBIS programs in two Title I elementary schools in Virginia, the school climate improved and positive behaviors increased.

Although many school violence prevention programs are available, very few studies have proven the effectiveness of elementary school violence prevention programs. Previous studies have focused primarily on a particular school violence prevention program, specific grade level, or one or more negative behaviors (Gaffney et al. 2021; Polanin et al. 2022). Hence, this systematic review aimed to identify current elementary school prevention programs in the United States that are deemed effective in reducing school violence behaviors. This study also sought to determine the types of tool agents and strategic delivery methods used to enhance school violence prevention programs.

3. Methods

3.1. Research Design

The methods of this review are in accordance with a protocol required to register with PROSPERO 2019. This study was registered on PROSPERO (Protocol No.: CRD42023426152). A systematic review was used to evaluate the effectiveness of school violence prevention programs. We chose this research design because it can help identify effective types of school violence prevention programs and determine how certain tools enhance these programs. The research approach is qualitative. Secondary data sources were utilized for the systematic literature review. To sum up, this study sought to answer the following three questions based on the prior research of systematic reviews of school violence:

- (1) What types of elementary school violence prevention programs have been implemented in the United States?
- (2) Are elementary school programs effective in reducing the occurrence of school violence among children aged 5–12 years?
- (3) What types of tools have been utilized to enhance these programs?

To elaborate, Question 1 seeks to find out what types of school violence prevention programs have been researched and implemented in elementary schools within the United States. Question 2 is about finding program effectiveness in reducing school violence after implementation. Examples could be reducing disruptive behaviors, reducing bullying activities, reducing violence, and/or reducing the number of suspensions upon program implementation. Question 3 differs from Question 2 in that it asks what types of tools of delivery are needed to implement the violence prevention program at the elementary school level. This could include providing a detailed curriculum that includes the following: posters, materials, music, a set detailed curriculum, newsletters, and/or workbook activities for students to complete. Lastly, setting clear expectations of student behavior as found within the school violence prevention programs is another tool of delivery.

3.2. Search Methods

We used four databases, namely, ERIC, Google Scholar, ProQuest Dissertations, and PsycINFO. Meta-analysis, quantitative studies, systematic reviews, case-control studies, and qualitative studies were identified in this protocol and considered for the review. We specifically included published articles in English, articles published between 2012 and 2023, elementary school education, and children aged 5–12 years.

The first author selected a ten-year review to include the highest level of evidence as supported by data on school violence. This includes program effectiveness by elementary schools, justified language that the main articles and publications were published in English,

and the study type which included case studies, meta-analysis, or systematic reviews. Additionally, the three systematic questions addressed contemporary violence prevention programs that were implemented in elementary schools. This was another reason why a time frame of 10 years was selected. Furthermore, the time frame of a decade was selected based on a point in time when there was considerable emergence of school violence acts such as bullying, physical aggression, school shootings, fights, and cyberbullying as reported by the media such as BBC, CNN, and Fox News, public data such as the National Center for Education Statistics or NCES, and crime databases such as the Bureau of Justice Statistics or BJS (Hassan 2022; Irwin et al. 2023; Katersky and Kim 2014; Kranz et al. 2018; Murphy 2022; Pagones et al. 2022; Thomsen et al. 2024). Recently, BJS reported that in 2022 there was a higher percentage of public schools in 2019–2020 that had reported problems with student cyberbullying at least once a week (Irwin et al. 2023). Moreover, NCES reported in 2022 that sixth graders enrolled in public schools experienced bullying victimization during school (Thomsen et al. 2024). Crime-related characteristics of bullying as reported by NCES in 2022 included personal fear of attack or harm by a perpetrator, fighting, avoidance behaviors, and victimization (Thomsen et al. 2024). Due to the recent and growing attention on school violence as indicated by Thomsen et al. (2024) and Irwin et al. (2023), the authors wanted to find out what types of elementary school prevention programs have been effective in reducing and preventing school violence in the United States, before further escalation begins.

The purpose of this review was to include a population group of elementary school students consisting of students from kindergarten to eighth grade to whom the authors desired to apply our findings for the systematic study. Based on searches and reviews, there is a limited number of systematic reviews and a shortage of relevant studies regarding the effectiveness of school violence prevention programs in elementary schools. More focus and published studies have been on reducing school violence programs primarily in secondary schools, which consist of middle and high schools in the United States. Therefore, the data we collected from the elementary school population represented the study population, which was used to address the effects of programs to reduce instances of school violence that were not assessed in prior systematic reviews.

The first author selected two experts in the field of K-12 education to review the published articles. The second author was selected to review the articles because of their expertise as a former elementary and secondary school teacher for 7 years and vice principal for 11 years. In their time of tenure, they implemented school violence prevention programs and observed firsthand school violence occurring at their school sites. The third author was selected to review the articles for the systematic review because of their 20-year experience teaching in sixth to eighth grade. In their time of tenure, they became familiar with guided school violence curriculums to help reduce school violence and have witnessed instances of bullying, cyberbullying, and physical aggression. The two authors also possess research skills that qualify them to review and score based on their experiences in the public school setting.

Experts such as a sheriff, a police officer, an active Federal Bureau of Investigation Special or FBI Agent, a retired Drug and Enforcement Agent or DEA, and a probation officer were considered for the systematic study due to their expertise in criminology and school violence. However, they were not consulted because they did not have the background experience of working or teaching in elementary public school settings as it relates to program implementation of school violence, curriculum implementation of school violence, and collaborating with staff, teachers, and administrators. In contrast, author two and author three both have experience in school violence program prevention implementation and behavioral support as school teachers and site administrators. Furthermore, both authors possess exceptional research skills and interests in this topic.

During the literature search, the first author utilized a combination of the following text terms: the setting (elementary school), the issue (violence* OR suspensions, behavior, deaths) AND methods (program* OR intervention) AND (case studies* OR meta-analysis).

The methodological quality of the studies followed the framework of [Ranganathan and Aggarwal \(2020\)](#) which included the following methods. First, underlying methods of systematic research involve identifying a prespecified protocol. The prespecified protocol included identifying three key research questions as they relate to school violence. Furthermore, explicit and transparent criteria for the inclusion studies were considered in the method of this study. We included studies that consisted of elementary school children aged 5–12 years who were male, female, or nonbinary and of low, average, or high socioeconomic background; and other people who participated in school violence prevention programs in private, charter, or public elementary schools in the United States (e.g., elementary school personnel, teachers, staff members, counselors, and administrators) and from the community. Additionally, explicit and transparent criteria for exclusion studies were considered. We excluded secondary schools that had implemented violence prevention programs, secondary school children aged 13–18 years, and published articles before 2013. [Ranganathan and Aggarwal \(2020\)](#) assert that the inclusion and exclusion of studies ensure the completeness of coverage of the available evidence, which provides a more objective, replicable overview. Upon identifying the inclusion and exclusion criteria, a comprehensive search for studies related to school violence prevention programs was conducted to meet the eligibility criteria. This was completed to ensure that they were related to the three research questions including an identified program, tools, and effectiveness of the program.

To test the robustness of the systematic review results, sensitivity analyses were considered ([Ranganathan and Aggarwal 2020](#)). The authors investigated the impact of excluding and including studies with certain characteristics such as not having or having programs to address school violence and not having tools or having tools to implement the program. The methodological quality therefore included studies with a specific design program to address school violence and a sample size of elementary students to meet the eligibility criteria. For articles that were similar during the search process, the validity was considered for further review. However, there were identified threats to validity which include internal, construct, and external ([Matthay and Glymour 2020](#)). The first type of threat was internal validity where there was a restricted range in settings, often one where a single experiment is conducted and with a sample of people ([Shadish et al. 2002](#)). The authors were cognizant of the fact that there was an extent to which the estimated association of experimentation in the identified study samples within the articles corresponded to a causal effect after exposure to the outcome ([Matthay and Glymour 2020](#)). Therefore, the authors evaluated the bias that came from study samples that involved program instrumentation, attrition, and the testing of the program. The second type of threat is called construct validity whereby causal generalization is perceived as representation ([Shadish et al. 2002](#)). When testing and reviewing the articles, the authors were aware of the extent to which measured variables such as programs and tools captured the concepts of the effectiveness of school violence that was intended to be assessed with these measures. The authors addressed potential threats that came about with construct validity which include measurement error, construct confounding, and reporting bias when determining the articles for eligibility ([Matthay and Glymour 2020](#)). Lastly, external validity refers to the extent to which the effect holds over variations in persons, settings, outcomes, and treatments ([Shadish et al. 2002](#)). Threats to external validity involved the reviewers being asked to judge the extent to which the data findings were relevant to elementary aged students, program implementation, overall outcomes of effectiveness, and school settings beyond the ones they studied ([Matthay and Glymour 2020](#)). Therefore, the authors took into consideration these threats to internal, external, and construct validity to reduce bias when selecting the final systematic studies for data collection. Eventually, the data extracted from the studies that met the eligibility criteria were pooled qualitatively in a tabled format. The tabled format is found in the Results section which shows the characteristics of each included study to allow for further interpretation ([Ranganathan and Aggarwal 2020](#)).

3.3. Review Process

The review process was conducted using Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses guidelines to promote quality and credibility (Page et al. 2021). First, 12,371 duplicated articles were removed from different databases. Second, 8716 were examined according to titles, abstracts, and the inclusion criteria. Of the 8,716 articles, 41%, 29%, 25%, 4%, and 1% were from ERIC, Google Scholar, ProQuest Dissertation, PsycINFO, and MEDLINE, respectively. A total of 8604 articles were then excluded according to the following criteria: (a) no assessment was made on school violence such as bullying, physical aggression, verbal aggression, or cyberbullying; (b) included secondary schools; (c) included elementary schools outside of the United States; (d) included school violence prevention programs outside of the United States; and (e) published before 2012. After the second screening, 112 articles were identified as eligible for review according to the inclusion criteria. Furthermore, 98 articles were excluded because they did not include the following: (a) a program intervention, (b) school violence prevention programs, (c) tools for violence prevention programs, or (d) relevant information such as students' grade levels or school affiliations.

Systematic procedures were put into place after selecting the two experts in the field of education. First, the two experts reviewed 112 articles that were assessed for eligibility individually. Second, each expert provided their scores on an Excel document based on the relevance of the article. Factors such as identified programs for school violence prevention in elementary schools were considered when scoring. A score of 1 was considered Highly Relevant. A score of 2 was considered as Maybe Relevant. A score of 3 was considered Not Relevant. Next, the first author compared the second author's and third author's scores to see which articles both experts agreed on. Altogether, 14 articles were identified by the two experts at a score of 1 or Highly Relevant. The 14 articles included in the systematic review were based on the programs implementation of full evaluations and publications (Figure 1).

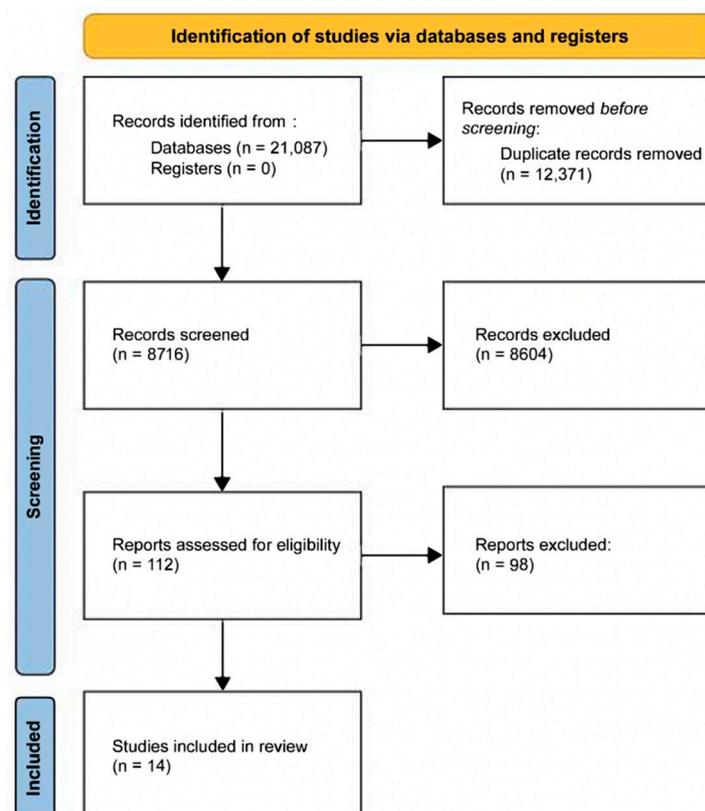


Figure 1. Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses Flowchart.

The remaining 14 articles revealed several evaluated school violence programs. The selection of 14 studies answered question number 1, what types of elementary school violence prevention programs have been implemented in the United States. The 14 articles included in this systematic study were measured using a tool called A Measurement Tool to Assess Systematic Reviews or AMSTAR 2 (Shea et al. 2017). The overall ratings in terms of quality of review were low in one, moderate in seven, and high in six reviews (Table 1). A high appraisal rating indicates zero or one noncritical weakness, a moderate appraisal rating indicates more than one noncritical weakness, a low appraisal rating indicates one critical flaw or without noncritical weakness, and a critically low appraisal indicates more than one critical flaw with or without noncritical weakness (Shea et al. 2017).

Table 1. Quality of reviews on school violence prevention programs.

Reviews	AMSTAR 2 Overall Confidence	Type of Review
1. SWPBIS—Bradshaw et al. (2012)	Moderate	Case Study
2. SWPBIS—Pas et al. (2019)	Moderate	Case Study
3. Positive Action—Flay (2014)	Moderate	Case Study
4. SWPBIS—Molloy et al. (2013)	Moderate	Case Study
5. Threat Assessment—Cornell et al. (2018)	Moderate	Case Study
6. Positive Action—Snyder et al. (2013)	Moderate	Case Study
7. CBPR—Gibson et al. (2015)	Moderate	Case Study
8. Positive Action—Duncan et al. (2017)	Moderate	Case Study
9. PBSIS—Christofferson and Callahan (2015)	High	Mixed-methods Case Study
10. CW-FIT—Weeden et al. (2016)	High	Case Study
11. Mindfulness-based Intervention—Meadows (2018)	High	Case Study
12. PBIS—Bradshaw et al. (2020)	Moderate	Case Study
13. RULER, Toolbox—Abbott (2021)	High	Case Study
14. SWPBIS—Burns (2022)	High	Qualitative Case Study

AMSTAR 2, A Measurement Tool to Assess Systematic Reviews 2; SWPBIS, School-wide Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports; CBPR, Community-based Participatory Research; PBSIS, Positive Behavior Support in Schools; CW-FIT, Class-wide Function-related Intervention Teams; PBIS, Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports; RULER, Recognizing, Understanding, Labeling, Expressing, and Regulating.

3.4. Data Analysis

Each review was synthesized narratively explaining the overall findings in an Excel document. The results were explained according to the three questions asked during the review. Based on the 14 studies evaluated, the first findings revealed the types of elementary school violence prevention programs. These studies were grouped and explained according to program type, target population, program behavior addressed, and geographical area of the study. Second, the 14 studies that revealed the effectiveness of elementary school violence prevention programs were categorized according to the follow-up period, primary results, and program effectiveness. Third, the findings of tools to reduce school violence were categorized by tool agent, tools for delivery, and the duration of program tools. Qualitative data were examined by thematic analysis. After data collection, key topics were categorized by the same or related topics to create a common theme. All published articles that met the inclusion criteria were examined and explained in the Results section.

4. Results

As mentioned, this study sought to identify current elementary school prevention programs in the United States that are effective in reducing school violence. Three research questions were formulated to identify what elementary school violence prevention programs have been implemented in the United States, how these programs are effective in

reducing the occurrence of school violence among elementary school children, and what types of tools have been utilized to enhance these programs.

4.1. School Violence Prevention Programs

Table 2 displays the types of elementary school violence prevention programs in the United States. The majority (43%) of these articles focused on the implementation of the PBIS program as a school-wide violence prevention program (Bradshaw et al. 2012; Bradshaw et al. 2020; Burns 2022; Christofferson and Callahan 2015; Molloy et al. 2013; Pas et al. 2019). The Positive Action program was also common (21%) among the reviewed articles as a violence prevention program implemented in certain schools. Additionally, 21% of the articles noted that social-emotional learning (SEL) curricula were used to support the reduction in negative behaviors. The remaining 36% were classified as “other” programs, which included a Virginia state-wide mandate for using threat assessment practice in schools (Cornell et al. 2018), Community-based Participatory Research (Gibson et al. 2015), Class-wide Function-Related Intervention Team (Weeden et al. 2016), Mindfulness-based Intervention curriculum (Meadows 2018), and RULER, Toolbox (Abbott 2021).

Table 2. Elementary school programs designed to reduce school violence.

School Violence Prevention Program	Target Population	Program Behavior Addressed	Study Area
1. SWPBIS Bradshaw et al. (2012)	Elementary, male and female	Bullying, aggressive, and disruptive behaviors	Maryland
2. SWPBIS Pas et al. (2019)	Elementary and secondary, male and female	Bullying, disruptive behaviors, social-emotional risks, absenteeism, and peer victimization	Maryland
3. Positive Action Flay (2014)	Elementary and middle, male and female	Bullying, disruptive behavior, substance abuse, and violence	Hawaii, Chicago
4. SWPBIS Molloy et al. (2013)	Elementary and secondary, male and female	Aggression or violence, substance use or possession, and defiance	United States
5. Threat Assessment Cornell et al. (2018)	Elementary and secondary, male and female	Threats, homicide, battery, and weapons on campus	Virginia
6. Positive Action Snyder et al. (2013)	Elementary, male and female	Violence, substance abuse, and sexual activity	Hawaii
7. CBPR Gibson et al. (2015)	Elementary, male and female	Bullying	United States
8. Positive Action Duncan et al. (2017)	Elementary and secondary, male and female	Social-emotional and misconduct behaviors	Chicago
9. PBSIS Christofferson and Callahan (2015)	Elementary, male and female	Bullying, disruptive behavior, social-emotional risks, absenteeism, and peer victimization	New Jersey
10. CW-FIT Weeden et al. (2016)	Elementary, male and female	Emotional Behavior Disorder—aggression toward others and avoidance	United States
11. Mindfulness-based Intervention Meadows (2018)	Elementary and secondary, male and female	Inappropriate behaviors, school attendance, conduct problems, hyperactivity inattention problems, and peer relationships	Ohio
12. PBIS Bradshaw et al. (2020)	Elementary and secondary, male and female	Bullying, aggressive, and disruptive behaviors	Maryland
13. RULER, Toolbox Abbott (2021)	Elementary, teachers	Trauma-induced behaviors and physical aggression	San Francisco
14. SWPBIS Burns (2022)	Elementary, teachers	Bullying, inappropriate behaviors, social-emotional risks, absenteeism, and peer victimization	Pennsylvania

SWPBIS, School-wide Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports; CBPR, Community-based Participatory Research; PBSIS, Positive Behavior Support in Schools; CW-FIT, Class-wide Function-related Intervention Teams; PBIS, Positive Behavior Intervention Supports; RULER, Recognizing, Understanding, Labeling, Expressing, and Regulating.

The review revealed interventions targeting students from primary and secondary grade levels (Table 2). Results derived from half of the articles targeted students at the primary grade levels (K–5th) in the elementary school setting exclusively, 7% targeted students in primary and middle school, and 43% targeted students from the primary and secondary levels (K–12th) through the high school grade levels within their study. The school violence prevention programs reported by all 14 studies are consistent and inclusive of both sexes. Interestingly, 36% of the articles revealed that boys were more likely to exhibit violent behaviors and experience office referrals than girls.

The elementary school violence prevention programs identified were specific while targeting various behaviors (Table 2). Bullying was the primary behavior and focus in many (50%) of these studies. Every article within this review reported on a type of program that directly impacts negative behaviors in the school setting; these behaviors included disruptive behaviors (100%), aggression (36%), physical violence (21%), peer victimization (21%), and social–emotional risks (21%).

The geographical areas being focused on by the 14 studies encompassed one or more states in the country (Table 2). The majority (79%) of the studies concentrated on one state as the area of focus. In particular, 36% of the studies were implemented on the East Coast, 21% in the Midwest, 14% in the Pacific, 7% in the South, and 7% on the West Coast. In addition, one study focused on a school in an urban community, and 14% of the studies gathered data from across the United States rather than specifying a particular region.

4.2. Effectiveness of School Violence Prevention Programs

The follow-up periods varied across each study (Table 3). Of the 14 studies, 5 were cross-sectional in design, collecting information at a single point in time; and 9 were longitudinal, collecting data over an extended period. Many of the studies (64%) used a pre–post-test data collection process. The studies included follow-up periods ranging from one academic school year (Abbott 2021; Burns 2022; Cornell et al. 2018; Duncan et al. 2017; Gibson et al. 2015; Meadows 2018; Weeden et al. 2016) to six or more years (Bradshaw et al. 2012, 2020; Christofferson and Callahan 2015; Flay 2014; Molloy et al. 2013; Pas et al. 2019; Snyder et al. 2013).

Table 3. Effectiveness of school violence prevention programs at the elementary level.

School Violence Prevention Program	Follow-Up Period	Primary Results	Program Effectiveness
1. SWPBIS Bradshaw et al. (2012)	Pre-test, interim, Post-test	33% reduction in office discipline-related referrals	Lowering disruptive behaviors and aggression; increasing prosocial behaviors
2. SWPBIS Pas et al. (2019)	Pre-test, interim, Post-test	1% improvement in suspension rates	Reducing suspension rates
3. Positive Action Flay (2014)	Pre-test, interim, Post-test	For extreme violence, the ES was -1.39 at grade 5 in Hawaii and -0.26 and -0.54 at grades 5 and 8, respectively, in Chicago. Bullying (ES = -0.26 and -0.39 at grades 5 and 8, respectively) and disruptive behaviors (ES = -0.23 and -0.50 at grades 5 and 8, respectively) were also reduced	Reducing disruptive behaviors, bullying, violence, and suspensions
4. SWPBIS Molloy et al. (2013)	Post-test (3rd year of implementation)	Reduction in office discipline referrals where expectations were taught, reward systems were in place, and violation systems were implemented	Lowering office discipline referrals where expectations were taught and reward system and violation system were in place

Table 3. Cont.

School Violence Prevention Program	Follow-Up Period	Primary Results	Program Effectiveness
5. Threat Assessment Cornell et al. (2018)	Post-test (2nd year of implementation)	Threat assessment team identified serious threats if made by a student above the elementary grades (odds ratio, 0.57; 95% lower and upper bound, 0.42–0.78), receiving special education services (1.27; 1.00–1.60), involving battery (1.61; 1.20–2.15), homicide (1.40; 1.07–1.82), or weapon possession (4.41; 2.80–6.96), or targeting an administrator (3.55; 1.73–7.30)	Determining the threat level as serious relative to the characteristics of the threat and the student involved
6. Positive Action Snyder et al. (2013)	Post-test (5th year of implementation)	Students attending intervention schools reported significantly less violence ($B = -1.410$, $SE = 0.296$, $p < 0.001$, $IRR = 0.244$) and were mediated by positive academic behaviors	Reducing violent behaviors and increasing positive behaviors
7. CBPR Gibson et al. (2015)	Pre-test, interim, Post-test	One school experienced a decrease in self-reported fear of bullying, two saw an increase in perceived peer intervention to stop bullying, and two saw an increase in perceived school staff intervention to stop bullying	Decreasing the fear of bullying and increasing interventions to stop bullying
8. Positive Action Duncan et al. (2017)	Pre-test, interim, Post-test	Improvement in children's behavioral trajectories of SECD and misconduct	Improving the trajectories of SECD and misconduct regardless of socioeconomic status
9. PBSIS Christofferson and Callahan (2015)	Post-test (2nd year of implementation)	Significant decrease in discipline-related incidents (year 1, mean = 5.45; year 2, mean = 3.22) and a decrease in in-school suspensions	Significantly reducing the number of office discipline referrals and in-school suspension rates
10. CW-FIT Weeden et al. (2016)	Pre-test, interim (4 weeks, 8 weeks), Post-test	Reduction in EBD behaviors and improvement in on-task behaviors (55% [43–81%] across all baseline phases)	Lowering disruptive behaviors and improving on-task behaviors and positive replacement behaviors
11. Mindfulness-based Intervention Meadows (2018)	Pre-test, Post-test, and 4 months post-intervention	Overall decrease in office referral rates from pre-intervention to active intervention, with decreased office referrals in nine students and no change in the remaining students	Showing positive effects on individual behavior
12. PBIS Bradshaw et al. (2020)	Pre-test, Post-test, after 3 years of implementation	Cost savings as estimated for elementary students and additional lifetime benefits from a reduction in suspensions	Reducing office referrals, suspensions, aggression, and bullying resulting in cost savings for schools and states
13. RULER, Toolbox Abbott (2021)	Post-test	Teacher-reported increase in self-regulation, problem-solving skills, and cooperative social functioning skills for abused and maltreated children	Increasing self-regulation skills and building a positive classroom community
14. SWPBIS Burns (2022)	Post-test	Reports of mostly minor problem behaviors among students, rather than major, by teachers	Reducing behaviors and increasing a positive classroom community

ES, effect size; SWPBIS, School-wide Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports; CBPR, Community-based Participatory Research; PBSIS, Positive Behavior Support in Schools; CW-FIT, Class-wide Function-related Intervention Teams; PBIS, Positive Behavior Intervention Supports; RULER, Recognizing, Understanding, Labeling, Expressing, and Regulating; SECD, social-emotional, character development; EBD, emotional and behavioral disorder.

Table 3 outlines the primary results and program effectiveness. The school-wide Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports (SWPBIS) program, PBSIS, and PBIS are all under the same multi-tiered framework. All three programs were proven effective at decreasing violence, suspensions, office referrals, and disruptive behaviors while improving prosocial and academic behaviors (Bradshaw et al. 2012; Bradshaw et al. 2020; Christofferson and Callahan 2015). Problem behaviors lowered significantly the longer the SWPBIS program was implemented (Pas et al. 2019). This program is reportedly most effective when implemented with high fidelity, where expectations are taught school-wide and reward and violation systems are in place (Molloy et al. 2013). Moreover, Positive Action revealed similar results of decreasing negative behaviors and improving positive

academic behaviors and other social–emotional outcomes (Duncan et al. 2017; Flay 2014; Snyder et al. 2013).

Table 3 indicates that all the programs effectively reduced negative behaviors among elementary school students. A few studies indicated that the longer the program was in place, the more impactful it was in reducing negative behaviors (Bradshaw et al. 2012; Bradshaw et al. 2020; Duncan et al. 2017; Pas et al. 2019). Schools that implemented SWPBIS had a direct effect on decreasing suspensions (Bradshaw et al. 2020; Christofferson and Callahan 2015; Pas et al. 2019) and decreasing the number of office referrals (Bradshaw et al. 2012; Bradshaw et al. 2020; Molloy et al. 2013). Schools implementing Positive Action had a direct effect on decreasing bullying incidents and violence (Duncan et al. 2017; Flay 2014; Snyder et al. 2013). Several of the studies implemented social–emotional curricula, leading to a positive effect in reducing bullying, aggression, and office referrals (Abbott 2021; Gibson et al. 2015; Meadows 2018). Overall, the social–emotional benefits of all the reviewed programs proved to be impactful in improving student behaviors at the elementary level.

4.3. Tools to Reduce School Violence

Tool agents are the individuals who are tasked with implementing the program. The five tool agents identified in Table 4 were (1) teachers; (2) the staff, which includes counselors and/or the administration; (3) a threat assessment team; (4) adult partners and/or youth researchers; and (5) a mindfulness facilitator. Our review revealed that 50% of the programs used staff as the tool agents, 28% used only teachers, and 20% used one of the three other tool agents (a threat assessment team, adult partners, youth researchers, or a mindfulness facilitator).

As indicated in Table 4, two types of delivery tools were used to establish, teach, and implement the foundation of the school violence prevention programs. These tools were clear expectations and a detailed curriculum. Our review showed that 57% of the studies established and implemented clear expectations such as school rules, climate, and positive behavior as the foundation of the violence prevention program. The SWPBIS, PBIS, and CW-FIT programs implemented a recognition and reward system as a means of proactively preventing undesired behaviors and encouraging desired behaviors (Bradshaw et al. 2020; Christofferson and Callahan 2015; Pas et al. 2019; Weeden et al. 2016). Meanwhile, 43% used a detailed curriculum as the delivery tool for establishing the violence prevention program. This tool included lessons, activities, training on conflict resolution, newsletters, and breathing techniques (Abbott 2021; Flay 2014). Recognizing, Understanding, Labeling, Expressing, and Regulating (RULER, Toolbox) and the Mindfulness-based Intervention curricula integrated mindfulness practices and emotional skill building into daily academic instructions (Abbott 2021; Meadows 2018). Lastly, both tools were used in 14% of the reviewed programs within the articles (Christofferson and Callahan 2015; Weeden et al. 2016).

Table 4 highlights the duration of the program tools. The violence prevention program was implemented and evaluated for less than 1 year in 29% of the studies, 1 year in 29%, 2–3 years in 14%, and 4 years or more in 28%. Thus, 71% implemented and evaluated the program for a period of at least 1–4 or more years. CPBR, Positive Action, RULER, Toolbox, and the Mindfulness-based Intervention curricula have lessons wherein students participate in 8–30 sessions (Abbott 2021; Flay 2014; Meadows 2018; Snyder et al. 2013).

Table 4. Tools to reduce school violence.

School Violence Prevention Program	Tool Agent	Tools for Delivery	Duration of Program Tools
1. SWPBIS Bradshaw et al. (2012)	Staff (administration and teachers)	Clear Expectations: school-wide expectations for student behavior.	4 years
2. SWPBIS Pas et al. (2019)	Staff and external coach	Clear Expectations: clear expectations and a consistent response system.	6 years
3. Positive Action Flay (2014)	Staff (counselors and teachers)	Detailed Curriculum: lessons include posters, puppets, music, hands-on materials, games, activities, and journals.	4–6 years
4. SWPBIS Molloy et al. (2013)	Staff	Clear Expectations: expectations defined and taught, reward system, violation system, and district-level support.	1 year
5. Threat Assessment Cornell et al. (2018)	Threat assessment team	Clear Expectations: procedure to gather data, assess the threat, and take action.	1 year
6. Positive Action Snyder et al. (2013)	Staff (administration, counselors, and teachers)	Detailed Curriculum: 140 lessons with posters, music, certificates, assemblies, newsletters, and counselor programs.	4–5 years
7. CBPR Gibson et al. (2015)	Adult partners and youth researchers	Clear Expectations: 23–30 weekly meetings to build trust, establish operating norms, and identify issues.	23–30 sessions in 1 year
8. Positive Action Duncan et al. (2017)	Staff	Detailed Curriculum: classroom lessons focused on feeling good about oneself.	8 sessions
9. PBSIS Christofferson and Callahan (2015)	Staff (administration and teachers)	Clear Expectations/Detailed Curriculum: school-wide behavioral expectations, school climate assessment, discipline referrals, interventions, model-desired behaviors, and recognition system.	2 years
10. CW-FIT Weeden et al. (2016)	Teachers	Clear Expectations/Detailed Curriculum: goals, lessons, workbook activities, and points for appropriate behavior.	16 sessions
11. Mindfulness-based Intervention Meadows (2018)	Mindfulness facilitator	Detailed Curriculum: 30-min class periods, focusing attention, mindfulness practices, empathy building, and psychosocial skill development.	12 weeks/24 sessions
12. PBIS Bradshaw et al. (2020)	Teachers	Clear Expectations: tier 1 intervention: behavioral expectations	3 years
13. RULER, Toolbox Abbott (2021)	Teachers	Detailed Curriculum: high expectations messages, caring relationships, manners, community service, breathing tools, quiet/safe space, and SEL instruction.	Theoretical saturation reached. <1 year
14. SWPBIS Burns (2022)	Teachers	Clear Expectations: expectations are defined and explicitly taught. Steps for discouraging problem behavior.	1 year

CBPR, Community-based Participatory Research; PBSIS, Positive Behavior Support in Schools; CW-FIT, Class-wide Function-related Intervention Teams; PBIS, Positive Behavior Intervention Supports; RULER, Recognizing, Understanding, Labeling, Expressing, and Regulating.

5. Discussion

This study systematically reviewed school violence prevention programs implemented in elementary schools. Results confirmed the existence of many school violence intervention programs aimed at the elementary school level. This finding is consistent with the study by Miller (2023), who believed that owing to the increased amount of violence in the 21st century, implementing innovative violence prevention programs is necessary to reduce the occurrence of violence in many communities and schools.

5.1. Program Strategy

The first theme derived from this study was the implementation of a violence prevention strategy such as social-emotional character development (SECD) or an SEL component. All but one review (Cornell et al. 2018) proved that the violence prevention program at each school integrated SECD embedded with clear expectations for student behavior, self-regulation skills, and building positive social skills and community. This finding is consistent with that of LaBelle (2023), who found that SEL programs, such as Positive Action, have aided in reducing negative behaviors by 58% among youth while building resiliency. Additionally, this finding corresponds with that of Lewis et al. (2021), who reported that programs such as the SEL-based Positive Action create beneficial outcomes on positive youth development, prosocial and emotional health, self-esteem, negative behavior reduction, health behaviors, environmental climate, and overall academics. Furthermore, a case study conducted in Spain showed that by developing emotional competencies including self-control, self-motivation, self-regulation, problem-solving, emotional perception, and persistence, students are more likely to become positive-change agents in life and their careers (Estrada et al. 2021). Therefore, incorporating SEL curricula or strategies in school violence prevention programs is pertinent in building personal responsibility and accountability in prosocial behaviors among youth.

5.2. Reduction in Negative Behaviors

The second theme was the reduction in negative behaviors throughout all of the violence prevention programs analyzed in this study. The instances of bullying were reduced, as found in the studies evaluating PBIS, CPBR, and Positive Action. This finding is confirmed in the study by McDaniel et al. (2022), who found that upon the implementation of a school-wide bullying prevention intervention program, bullying behaviors were reduced among 342 students in an elementary school located in the southeastern part of the United States.

The present systematic study also confirmed that SWPBIS, threat assessment, and mindfulness-based intervention programs resulted in reduced office referrals and behavior discipline. This finding is confirmed in a systematic review of 29 studies across the United States and Europe, where significant reductions in school discipline were noted from the implementation of SWPBIS (Lee and Gage 2020).

This present study also found that Positive Behavior Supports in Schools (PBSIS) aided in reducing suspensions, as confirmed in the study by Gage et al. (2020) wherein using proactive strategies such as restating expectations and reinforcing appropriate behaviors with school bucks or token coins reduces in-school suspensions. Similarly, a case study conducted in elementary schools in British Columbia and Alberta in Canada found that PBIS implementation led to a reduction in disciplinary referrals, improved student behavior, and a more positive school environment (Greflund et al. 2014).

The present study revealed that behavior issues and serious acts of violence decreased after the implementation of programs such as the CW-FIT, SWPBIS, Positive Action, and Aggression and Violence Reduction Intervention. In summary, the success stories of these programs echo a universal truth, that investing in school violence prevention is an investment in our children's future. Furthermore, early implementation of violence prevention programs with an integrated SEL component in children's education can have long-lasting positive effects on students' overall well-being and success in life (Gulbrandson 2019).

5.3. Tool Agents

The third theme was the effective tool agents, including various staff members. Although the classroom teacher was identified as a tool agent in 28% of the programs, this study found that 50% of staff members were engaged in the program, leading to positive outcomes. This finding is consistent with the study of [Corbin et al. \(2022\)](#), who reported that when schools include educators and staff members such as school psychologists, special educators, and paraeducators, their responsibilities can differentially impact students' behavioral outcomes. In addition, staff members who leverage shared time to resolve behavioral issues and integrate SWPBIS with academic instruction can influence the successful outcome of classroom instruction and student behavior ([Corbin et al. 2022](#)). This finding also corresponds with the study results of [Hannigan and Hannigan \(2020\)](#), who found that having a designated group of local experts (e.g., the school administration) who know their goals, roles, and responsibilities and who are actively involved in the execution of a school violence prevention program can lead to successful implementation and reduced behavioral issues. Moreover, [McClure et al. \(2022\)](#) stressed in a global study on successful youth violence prevention programs in Central America and Germany that when staff, parents, and other caregivers provide consistent modeling, support, and encouragement to children, they can develop skills that are key to violence prevention. This finding demonstrates that when all stakeholders can deliver strategic methods with purpose and clarity, school violence prevention programs can be enhanced.

5.4. Behavioral Expectations

The fourth theme was the effective method of delivery via clear behavioral expectations. In the present study, 57% focused on clear behavior expectations for students; these expectations included stating student behavior expectations in areas of the school environment such as the classroom, playground, hallways, cafeteria, restrooms, and school buses ([Bradshaw et al. 2012](#); [Burns 2022](#); [Molloy et al. 2013](#); [Pas et al. 2019](#)). This finding supports the study of [Petrasek et al. \(2022\)](#) and [Davies \(2022\)](#), who believed that educators need to reach a consensus on school-wide expectations for students and provide uniformity on expected behavior, thereby making it easier for students to understand how to behave no matter where they may be at school. Additionally, this finding supports the study of [Goldman et al. \(2022\)](#), who argued that clearly defined rules state exactly what to do so that no interpretation or understanding of "unwritten rules" is required to reduce negative behaviors. This finding also supports the study of [Gaffney et al. \(2021\)](#), who conducted a global study on the effectiveness of school violence prevention programs in the United States, Canada, and Europe; they noted that the Dynamic Approach to School Improvement identified the essential element of clear and efficient expectations such as campus guidelines and rules to reduce violence. This finding supports those of the review that identified clear expectations as an essential aspect of a school violence prevention program. The present study revealed that providing direction on behavioral expectations in programs has helped reduce school violence. In future research, factors such as SEL or SECD strategies, negative behaviors, staff as tool agents, and clear behavioral expectations should be addressed when analyzing school violence prevention programs.

6. Conclusions

Given that the rise of student aggression, violence, disrespect, and erratic behaviors continues to cause educators to leave the profession and students to feel unsafe at school both locally and globally, comprehensive, and effective school violence prevention programs are urgently needed ([Ramos and Hughes 2020](#); [Sideridis and Alghamdi 2023](#)). Targeting these behaviors with intentional programs such as SWPBIS and Positive Action yields positive outcomes in creating a safer and more respectful school environment. This systematic review proves the effectiveness of the SWPBIS and Positive Action programs and the need to set clear behavioral expectations while incorporating SEL for students to reduce negative behaviors. Therefore, all elementary schools in the United States must

implement some type of violence prevention program supported by the staff, teachers, and administration while incorporating strategies to build character development. Character development and SEL have a direct impact on developing students' emotions, leading to healthier interactions with peers and fewer incidences of violence. Prioritizing the implementation of school violence prevention programs at the elementary level ensures safe spaces of learning and empowers youth, thereby fostering a brighter and more secure future for generations to come.

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Impact Statement: School violence is a major concern for scholars, policymakers, schools, and communities in the United States. This systematic review revealed that school violence prevention programs in elementary schools reduce instances of violence, behavioral issues, suspensions, and office referrals. The findings presented in this review can support administrators, school districts, policymakers, and the development of teacher education programs at the university level and school violence prevention programs.

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