

# A is for Apple, B is for Bulletproof: The Fortification of Schools

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## Abstract

*From Colorado and Connecticut to Florida and Texas, school shootings have struck the U.S. education system. In response, there has been a proliferation of policies, programs, and practices to make schools safer. We term this phenomenon the fortification of schools. Fortification entails prioritizing and instituting various structures, resources, and routines that militarize schools; defines “safety” as a function of the school building; and positions educators as responders to gun violence. Thus, fortification asks educational administrators, teachers, and staff to work in new ways. To expose and better understand the policies, resources, and practices associated with fortification, we apply theories of structuration and racialized organizations. In so doing, we illuminate how fortification is continually shaped by systemic racism. Our discussion of fortification explains racialized dimensions of school safety policy implementation, operationalizes facets of structure-agency theory, and provides recommendations for practitioners and scholars concerned with responses to school shootings.*

**Keywords:** school safety policy, structure-agency theory, racialization, school shootings, racialized organizational theory

In the mid 1990s, many urban public school districts installed metal detectors, particularly inside secondary schools enrolling predominately students of color, to prevent people from carrying guns into schools (Kupchik et al., 2009; Schildkraut & Grogan, 2019). Despite such efforts, the 1999 Columbine High School shooting unleashed attention to safety and security across districts. By the early 2000s, nearly every state and district had instituted a mandatory expulsion policy for students carrying a gun on a school campus (Curran, 2016). Since the tragic 2012 Newtown, 2018 Parkland, and 2022 Uvalde massacres, there have been multiple movements to grapple with gun violence on school campuses (Dunbar et al., 2019). Unfortunately, and appallingly, there probably will be other tragic school shootings in the time prior to the publication of this piece.

Mass casualty incidents in schools have precipitated increased public attention to school security alongside policymakers' and educators' attention making schools safer. For instance, heightened attention to securitizing schools followed the elementary school shooting in Uvalde, Texas, in May 2022. Agonizingly, school shootings have occurred

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across state, district, and school contexts; in blue and red states; in urban, suburban, and rural settings; and in secondary and elementary schools. Moreover, when school buildings shuttered due to the COVID-19 pandemic, March 2020 was the first month *without* a school shooting in the United States since 2002 (Lewis, 2020).

Over the past twenty years, the adoption of numerous policies and practices for preventing—and responding to—school shootings are taken for granted and legitimized by educators, students, policymakers, community members, and other constituents. Relying on multiple strategies, waves of reform have sought to protect students as well as educators and staff. We term the cumulative and racialized efforts to make PreK–12 schools “safer” from gun violence as *fortification*. Importantly, fortification is a racialized organizational process. Black and Brown students, specifically, experience higher rates of surveillance and punishment in schools, including higher rates of arrest on their school campus (Johnson & Davis, 2021).

Fortification attends to the securitization and target-hardening aspects of school violence prevention. For example, due to the ways racism inherently affects school safety policy implementation, including through district funding patterns and biases of teachers, staff, and leaders, fortification is continually shaped by targeting racialized organizational elements (Ray, 2019). In principle, fortification seeks to prevent gun violence in schools in a manner that increases the safety and well-being of all students, teachers, leaders, and staff. Since securitization efforts are commonplace across suburban, rural, and urban school districts (Astor et al., 2005), fortification might appear to be a race-neutral response to school shootings. However, the policies and practices of school security operate in an environment pervaded by institutional racism, and they affect students of color disproportionately (Edwards, 2021; Morris, 2016; Ray, 2019). These aspects of security policies disproportionately control and punish Black and Brown students, contributing to the school-to-prison pipeline (Heidelberg et al., 2022; Morris, 2016; Turner & Beneke, 2020).

Although there is a growing body of research on school safety (e.g., Curran, 2016; Turner & Beneke, 2020), much of this research concentrates on the effectiveness of a single safety program, rather than the broader institutional dynamics regarding preventing or responding to gun violence in schools. Scholars have recently spotlighted racial disparities in discipline practices and inequities in school security (e.g., Edwards, 2021; Irby & Coney, 2021; Johnson & Davis, 2021; Skiba, 2014; Turner & Beneke, 2020). For example, Irby and Coney (2021) assert that new school discipline regulations play a core role in the punishment of students in majority schools. Crucially, these scholars emphasize the importance of moving beyond race-neutral approaches to school safety (Edwards, 2021; Hirschfield, 2008). Yet little of this scholarship explicitly attends to districts and schools as racialized organizations in which security policies are implemented by multiple actors. As a result, scholars and practitioners lack clarity and insight on the organizational conditions and practices that influence the schools’ responses to gun violence. To explain and confront institutional and organizational aspects of fortification, we apply the concepts of structuration and racialized organizations (Giddens, 1984; Ray, 2019). This paper explicates fortification, as the U.S. pre-K-12 education system’s response to school shootings. First, we summarize the trajectory of the U.S. education system’s approaches

to school security over the past two decades. This summary includes reviewing existing research on the nature of school safety policies and practices to aid in showcasing what is known about the racialized enactment of fortification. Second, we present tenets of structuration theory, to provide a lens for viewing the ongoing, recursive structure-dynamics shaping school safety policy implementation. Third, we apply concepts of structuration to demonstrate the interplay of school security structures and actors' practices and to advance arguments on fortification in the U.S. PreK–12 education field. Our discussion of fortification offers insights on the implementation of school security, addresses racialized aspects of responses to school shootings, deepens understandings of structure-agency theory, and provides recommendations so that scholars and practitioners can attend to school security issues in a more just manner.

### **Federal and State School Safety Policy**

Seeking to reduce gun violence in schools, federal and state policies serve as one of the structural forces shaping fortification. These policies carry ideas and resources, and they intend to motivate organizational and individual change in a particular direction (Coburn, 2016). Yet, similar to policies addressing other issues at the state and federal level (e.g., Medicaid expansion, housing, school desegregation), safety policies are not uniformly adopted, and there exists much variability in their implementation (Honig, 2006).

For nearly thirty years, the federal government has played an integral role in the fortification of schools. The 1994 Guns-Free School Zone Act awarded federal funds to states adopting a policy that mandated the expulsion of at least one year for students who brought guns to school (Irby & Coney, 2021). Between 1999 and 2019, the Columbine, Sandy Hook, and Parkland tragedies gave rise to the proliferation of federal policies that put forth regulations, systems, and procedures on school security (Astor et al., 2005; Curran et al., 2020; Schildkraut & Grogan, 2019; Temkin et al., 2020). For example, following the 2018 Parkland school shooting, President Trump's administration created the Federal Commission on School Safety. The commission's final report addressed three domains: (a) prevention, (b) protection and mitigation, and (c) responding and recovering from school shootings. Prevention recommendations included creating a positive school climate, increasing access to mental health services, and rescinding Obama-era guidelines that encouraged schools to reduce exclusionary discipline rates for minoritized students. The protection and mitigation recommendations focused on how school staff should engage in safety training and how to make school campuses more secure (e.g., installing cameras for the school entrance, locking classroom doors). Finally, recommendations related to responding and recovering suggested how teachers and school leaders should conduct active shooter drills (Levinsky, 2022). Although the Commission's guidance used the term "protect and mitigate," it fostered approaches that controlled and surveilled students.

Similarly, in the wake of the 2018 Parkland shooting, state school safety policies proliferated: 16 states adopted laws mandating that schools conduct active shooter drills (Schildkraut & Grogan, 2019). Moreover, less than one month after the Uvalde school shooting, Texas legislators debated policy responses to securitize schools that ranged from arming teachers with guns to hardening school entrances (White, 2022). In this manner,

school shootings triggered the expansion of school security policies at both the federal and state levels. We assert that lenses from organizational sociology are utile to fully understand the structures and activities shaping the contextualized, ground-level enactment of school security policy. Common school security strategies implemented during this expansion were inequitably applied and met with mixed results.

## **Strategies for Gun Safe Schools**

### **School Resource Officers**

The adoption of school resource officers (SROs) varies considerably by state and school level (NCES, 2022; Weisburst, 2019). In most states, high schools are more likely to employ an SRO as opposed to a social worker (Ampie, 2021). Studies analyzing whether the presence of an SRO is associated with changes in behavior, crime, and exclusionary discipline report contradictory results (Fisher & Hennessy, 2016). Some studies have determined that SROs reduce reported infractions related to weapons, assault, and drug possession or use (e.g., Owens, 2017; Sorensen et al., in press; Theriot, 2009; Zhang, 2019). Other studies found that serious offenses increase with the presence of SROs (e.g., Na & Gottfredson, 2011; Zhang, 2019). Findings from previous studies have also revealed that the presence of SROs is associated with an increase in students reported to law enforcement for non-serious offenses (Fisher & Hennessy, 2016; Na & Gottfredson, 2011; Owens, 2017; Sorenson et al., 2020).

Furthermore, there is mounting evidence that SROs negatively influence the educational experiences and outcomes of students of color (Weisburst, 2019). Turner and Beneke (2020) maintain that SROs contribute to the school-to-prison pipeline with deleterious consequences for students of color. Sorensen et al. (2020) argue that SROs are negatively associated with high school graduation rates for Black and Hispanic students in predominantly white schools. SROs, furthermore, are more likely to assault—in addition to arrest—Black and Brown students (Fabelo et al., 2011; Miller & Jean-Jacques, 2016; St. George, 2011). As a keystone of the fortification structure, it is evident that SROs shape the experiences and outcomes of students of color (Weisburst, 2019).

### **Tools for School Safety**

In addition to employing SROs to maintain school security, districts and schools have adopted tools to make schools gun-safe. Metal detectors, particularly, are a commonly used fortification tool. In 1999, 9% of public middle and high school students reported that their schools used metal detectors, but, in 2015, 12% reported the presence of metal detectors (Musu-Gillette et al., 2018; Schildkraut & Grogan, 2019)—a three percentage-point jump in six years. Some scholars and advocates argue that metal detectors are a necessary tool for gun-safe schools (e.g., Johnson, 2000). Yet the success rates of metal detectors across different settings suggest otherwise: in U.S. airports, their failure rates are as high as 85% (Blake, 2017; Lardieri, 2017). Further, as Schildkraut and Grogan (2019) found, the presence of metal detectors does not always deter school shootings. Notably, metal detectors can have an adverse effect on students' feelings of safety (Gastic, 2010; Hankin et al., 2011).

Beyond metal detectors, districts and schools have invested in other security tools such as armored school building doors, bulletproof whiteboards, and surveillance technology, such as security cameras. The costs for such fortification items are not trivial with specialized security doors costing approximately \$2,500 each, and a door buzzer system costs approximately \$10,000 (Remo, 2020). Vendors selling such products claim that they protect children and educators against gunfire, yet researchers have not determined their impact on the safety of students and educators (e.g., Schildkraut & Grogan, 2019). By spending funds on security doors and buzzers, the education system reduces resources for alternative strategies that increase student wellbeing and community engagement.

Multiple researchers (Turner & Beneke, 2020; Walker, 2019; Warnick & Kapa, 2019) have explored how investments in security equipment adversely affect students (e.g., over-disciplining students, decreasing student trust of teachers and administrators, and diverting resources from mental health supports). Other scholars have uncovered racial disparities in the way security measures affect students' experiences (Lacoe, 2015) and have highlighted how racism continually affects—and reinforces—the policies and practices of school security through macro-forces as well as individual biases and organizational elements (Ray, 2019; Turner & Beneke, 2020). Centering the recursive, racialized structure-agency dynamics in the implementation of school security can reveal answers to critical questions about fortification.

### **An Overview of Structuration Theory**

To grapple with the interrelationship between the policies, resources, macro-forces of racism, and people involved in the process of fortification, we draw on structuration theory. Rooted in organizational sociology, structuration characterizes the ongoing interplay between structure and agency within organizations (Giddens, 1984; Orlikowski, 1996). Attending to both structures (e.g., regulations and policies, resources, institutional logics) and the agency of people, this lens has utility for examining policy implementation (Coburn, 2016). In the education field, researchers have applied structuration theory to explore how leaders and teachers enact reforms, such as special education and teacher evaluation systems (Donaldson & Woulfin, 2018; Bray & Russell, 2016).

#### **Structure**

Rules, logics, and resources are key structures that mediate, promote, and/or constrain structuration (Giddens, 1984; Scott, 2001). School security policies encapsulate the rules and ideas that structure organizational change and individual behavior for fortification in schools (Coburn, 2016). Specifically, federal gun and state school security policies function as structures that shape fortification (Musu-Gillete et al. 2018; Temkin et al., 2020). In particular, regulations on lockdown and active shooter drills have influenced how schools normalize fortification.

Institutional logics, defined as the deep-seated belief systems of an institution, also guide organizations and their actors (Goodrick & Reay, 2011; Scott et al., 2000). The *logics of safety* define educators' roles in keeping schools safe and channel their work as they navigate safety issues (Johnson & Davis, 2021). Aligning with Levinsky's (2022) scholarship on lockdown policies and procedures, logics of safety incorporate ideas on

what roles, terminology, and activities are appropriate for school safety. These logics may emphasize prevention, repression, and/or care (Levinsky, 2022). Moreover, logics ebb and flow, with different logics predominating over different time periods and in different contexts, which are often undergirded by oppressive forces of domination (Russell, 2011; Scott et al., 2000). For instance, at a particular socio-cultural moment, or in specific districts, a particular logic of safety may be deemed more (or less) legitimate (Levinsky, 2022). Each logic of safety is upheld by resources that enable specific organizational and individual activities (Coburn, 2016; Fligstein, 2001; Scott, 2001).

In the U.S. education system, financial and other resources tend to correlate with multiple school- and student-level outcomes, including achievement on standardized tests and high school graduation rates (Jackson et al., 2016). Strikingly, although states and districts have slashed budgets for teachers, counselors, social workers, librarians, and nurses in schools (Black, 2016; Goldstein, 2019; Perry, 2016; Sparks & Harwin, 2018; Richman, 2019), educational systems have increased funding for school security, including efforts to harden as well as monitor campuses with locking doors and cameras (Cox & Rich, 2018). In 2017, schools spent \$2.8 billion on school safety equipment and services (Cox & Rich, 2018; Thureau & Wald, 2019). These funds, in addition to other resources, deepen fortification by permitting the installation of tools and technology that surveil as well as control students. Structures—ranging from regulations to funding— influence fortification efforts that harden schools and shape the experiences of students and educators.

### **Agency**

Researchers investigating agency attend to the people inhabiting institutions who engage with structures and advance (or block) organizational change (Fligstein, 2001; Hallett, 2010). Studies have uncovered how actors deploy, revise, or reject structures, including logics and regulations (Coburn, 2016; Woulfin, 2016). In the policy implementation literature, scholars have found that district leaders, principals, and teachers express agency in carrying out reform (Bray & Russell, 2016; Donaldson & Woulfin, 2018). They elevate the notion that educators find space to modify, or even resist, policy guidelines. Turning to fortification, leaders, teachers, and SROs play roles in enacting, monitoring, and dismantling school safety and security structures within schools (Levinsky, 2022; Turner & Beneke, 2020).

Structuration attends to agency, or the flow of action, within organizations (Coburn, 2016; Giddens, 1984). People in a variety of roles (e.g., district leaders, principals, SROs, students, community groups) influence fortification's flow of action by designing, reinforcing, altering, or dismantling structures associated with school security (Coburn, 2016). Further, the daily work of these individuals shapes the nature and extent of fortification (Coburn, 2016; Fligstein, 2001; Giddens, 1984).

### **Racialized Structuration**

Since the structures of school safety policy are nested within longstanding, institutionalized, macro-structures and meso-systems of racism, neither actors' work in carrying out school safety efforts, nor the structures of school security, are race-neutral.

As Ray contends, individuals' activities and structural elements of school security are racialized because the conceptions, biases, and work of educators, SROs, and others who implement school security policy are informed by race as the defining factor. These activities and elements may proclaim race-neutrality but are ultimately influenced by racism.

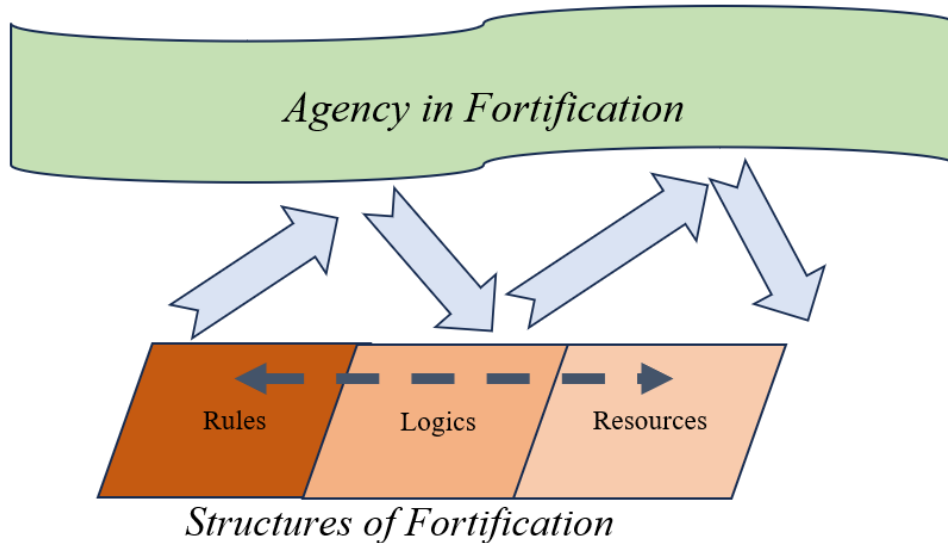
Accordingly, racialized structures include the dominant conceptualizations, or institutional logics, of what is a safe school. Funding, too, is a racialized structure. Districts serving higher versus lower proportions of students of color are funded at disparate levels. At the macro-level, schools with higher proportions of students of color often face budgetary challenges, yet these schools allocate funding for SROs and security devices (Lindsay et al., 2018; Turner & Beneke, 2020). Consequently, these schools may lack resources for other initiatives due to spending funds on SROs and security devices. At the micro-level, an individual's racialized beliefs and practices such as biases regarding student discipline and personal schemas defining a safe school, influence fortification since these beliefs and practices shape an individual's enactment of strands of safety policy (Morris, 2016; Ray, 2019). For example, Morris (2016) found that white educators' racist biases contribute to their punitive responses to Black girls, oftentimes pushing them out of schools and referring them to law enforcement. The racial identity of administrators, teachers, and SROs shape their enactment of school safety policies. Thus, *who* is implementing school security policy affects the nature and consequences of fortification.

### **Fortification: Towards a Theoretical Framework**

Based on the interplay among structures, resources, and logics of school safety—and the on-the-ground practices of educators and students—fortification is a process of structuration. We define fortification as the cumulative efforts to make the school system “safer,” including preventing school shootings. These efforts encompass hardening school campuses, shifting conceptualizations and regulations of safety, and changing the nature of leaders' and teachers' roles and responsibilities with regard to safety.

### **Structures of Fortification**

If schools, teachers, and students become legible through an optic of labor, then as represented in Figure 1, three structures—regulations, logics, and resources—enable fortification by setting guidelines, providing conceptualizations, and enabling particular types of school security practices. Applying tenets of racialized organizational theory (Ray, 2019), we address the way forces of systemic racism is interwoven with multiple structures. This includes, for example, shining light on how regulations on searching students for weapons reflect the racist, carceral logic (Merkwae, 2015).



**Figure 1**  
*Structure-Agency Dynamics of Fortification*

### ***Regulations***

Policies and other regulations that carry mandates operate as structures of fortification. For example, the Federal Gun-Free School Zones Act of 1994 included regulations related to guns on school campuses. This law contributed to nearly every state adopting zero-tolerance laws for guns in schools (Curran, 2016; Driver, 2018). These zero-tolerance policies are examples of racialized regulations due to their resulting in racial disparities in which students of color are disproportionately arrested for weapons-related violations (Fabelo et al., 2011). State-level regulations require schools to create safety plans that include procedures for responding if guns are found on campus. These formal plans list concrete steps for administrators, teachers, and staff to follow. The state of California developed an intricate compliance tool so that district and school leaders engage in strategic planning on school security (California Department of Education, 2020). Similarly, New York State specified that schools must conduct four lockdown drills per year (New York State Homeland Security and Emergency Services, 2019). In delineating the rules and procedures for what to do if a student is carrying a gun or if there is an armed intruder, these structures channel activity to reproduce conceptualizations of what is a “safe” school and further institutionalize fortification.

### ***Logics***

Logics of school security, which carry deep-seated ideas on how educational organizations, administrators, and teachers should respond to the problem of gun violence, also shape fortification (Scott & Davis, 2006). The militarization logic, a logic of school security, emphasizes student conduct rules coupled with punishments for infractions, while the transformative logic prioritizes building a just community and repairing

damaged relationships. The militarization logic supports using SROs—often armed with tasers or firearms—to address gun violence. In contrast, the transformative logic encourages care-, equity-, and relationship-based techniques to prevent violence in schools.

Since different actors may deploy different logics, some educators may engage in work coupled to the militarization logic, and others may engage in work reflecting the transformative logic (Coburn, 2016). For example, district and school administrators may draw on the militarization logic, allocating resources for searching students and metal detectors. Yet—even within the same district—certain teachers and counselors may wield the transformative logic in aiming to improve the school climate and provide proactive supports for students. The variegated use of logics influences the fortification of schools.

The patterning of logics in and across organizations is racialized because systemic racism upholds certain ideas, routines, and practices (Ray, 2019). As a result, educational leaders in districts serving larger proportions of Black students may draw on different logics of safety than those in predominately white districts. In turn, these leaders might interpret and respond to security policies and initiatives (e.g., discipline policy, staff professional development) in ways that reproduce inequities in the treatment and experiences of historically marginalized students.

### ***Resources***

By bolstering certain ideas and actors while devaluing others, resources affect fortification (see Figure 1). In the case of school safety, resources affect the materials and technology purchased as well as staff hired to fortify schools. School safety is estimated to be a \$3 billion industry in the United States—with funds spent on metal detectors, bulletproof doors and windows, surveillance technology (e.g., video cameras), and SROs (Thurau & Wald, 2019). This case demonstrates the prioritization of the militarization logic by bolstering the role of safety officers over counselors and other supports for the mental health and wellbeing of students.

Resources uphold or perpetuate longstanding inequities over who has access to what type of educational opportunities. Building upon Fisher et al.'s (2022) metaphor of protecting versus policing, we point to the variability in safety structures and procedures between urban districts that serve a high proportion of students of color and districts serving a high proportion of white students. On the one hand, many predominantly white, higher socio-economic status (SES) districts have dedicated resources to the design and building of “safer” school facilities (e.g., bulletproof windows) to deter intruders, teacher professional development on responding to an intruder, and school counselors to support children and youth with mental health needs (Fisher et al., 2022). On the other hand, many urban districts educating predominantly Black and Brown students allocate resources to install metal detectors and patrol the entrances of school buildings, effectively policing the school's own students (Fisher et al., 2022; Kupchik et al., 2009; Schildkraut & Grogan, 2019). These differences in the types of resources employed for fortification affect leaders, teachers, staff, and students by exacerbating racial inequities in schooling.

### **Agency for Fortification**

Though structures control aspects of fortification, people—and their agency—still matter (see Figure 1). We underscore that multiple actors are involved in enacting school

security efforts: from state and district leaders to teachers, parent, and student advocacy organizations. For instance, the Philadelphia Student Union had frequent meetings with district officials and recently called for #PoliceFreeSchools (Petrillo, 2020). National community groups, including Moms Demand Action and Women Against Gun Violence, have pressured school boards to adopt gun safety measures (Kingkade, 2020). Contrastingly, the National Association of School Resource Officers (NASRO) has campaigned to expand the use of SROs in schools (Canady et al., 2012). These actors deploy different structural elements and steer fortification in different ways. In sum, district leaders, principals, SROs, and members of community-based organizations use their agency to bolster—or dismantle—various school security structures.

Moreover, various actors in the education field make choices as they take up and respond to fortification structures (Woulfin, 2016; Coburn, 2016). Weiler and Armenta (2014) offer the example of principals making certain decisions about school security systems and activities. As a school leader, the principal interprets security policies and then creates or refines security protocols (Dunbar & Villarruel, 2004; Irby & Coney, 2021). Leaders, especially, have discretion regarding how to enact school security policy. For instance, a principal may prioritize approaches aligned to the transformative logic, even while leading in systems with militarized approaches to school security. Stemming from leaders' interpretations, choices, and daily work, the enacted, ground-level practices of fortification may differ from formal policy.

### **Mechanisms of Fortification**

People, as social actors, use their agency to reinforce, refine, or reject structures of school security to influence fortification. For example, a principal leading a school with a large proportion of students of color may emphasize different safety policies as compared to a principal of a school serving mainly white students. These leadership activities reinforce certain structures of fortification and perpetuate racist approaches to school safety. Thus, people and their agency shape the fortification of schools in racialized ways.

To disentangle the concept of fortification, we delve into three dimensions of Giddens' (1979) structure-agency duality: signification, legitimation, and domination. We provide illustrations of these dimensions in the implementation of school security policies and practices. As represented in Table 1, the three dimensions entail communication about security policy (signification), norms of interaction for implementing security policy (legitimation), and the use of resources to reinforce security policy (domination). Across signification, legitimation, and domination, people shape structures that, subsequently, influence local practices. Notably, racialized organizational elements affect all three dimensions of fortification (Ray, 2019). To help illustrate the dimensions of fortification, we present two contrasting vignettes of District A and District B, which foreground racialized features of efforts to make schools gun safe.

#### **Vignette One**

District A offers the case of fortification to protect children within a higher SES status district serving primarily white students. Leaders, teachers, and parents were inquiring about what measures were in place to prevent school shootings and make District A's

campuses more secure. In response, administrators in District A allocated funding to renovate school buildings with high-tech security tools and instituted several official procedures for how adults, including staff and parents, would enter schools. District and school leaders also adopted and enacted routines in which teachers, staff, and students practiced responding to a school shooting. District A’s administrators invested in active response training for all staff as well as training on first aid techniques geared towards addressing gunshot wounds. In District A, money and time was allocated toward school security.

**Vignette Two**

District B, in comparison, represents the case of fortification that advances carceral control in a lower SES district serving primarily Black and Brown students. Leaders, teachers, and SROs in District B normalized using punitive measures for school security. Though District B lacked funding for school counselors and for training teachers and staff on social and emotional learning (SEL), District B allocated funding for SROs and metal detectors to securitize campuses and prevent gun violence. Moreover, school leaders employed SROs to monitor and address student behavior. In turn, leaders and teachers from District B relied heavily on exclusionary disciplinary practices which disproportionately target students of color and disabled students. Below, we explain signification, legitimation, and domination in the case of school fortification and embed examples associated with the two vignettes.

**Table 1**  
*Three Pillars of the Structure-Agency Duality*

	<b>Signification</b>	<b>Legitimation</b>	<b>Domination</b>
<b>Structure</b>	Structures of Signification	Structures of Legitimation	Structures of Domination
<b>Modality</b>	Interpretive schemes	Norms	Resources
<b>Agency</b>	Communicating	Permitting interactions	Wielding power

**Signification**

As a pillar of structuration, signification refers to the meanings contained in a social structure. Signification attends to how actors’ communication can form shared, organizational meanings (Giddens, 1979; Stones, 2005). Notably, signification is the

mechanism by which ideas become ossified into organizational structures. Regarding fortification, people discuss structures, policies, and logics of school safety. When leaders, teachers, and parents communicate about school safety policy, they make sense of problems and solutions. Their communication, however, may reproduce or modify schemas that then become embedded into fortification structures.

For instance, during meetings on school safety guidelines, educators may communicate various solutions addressing safety. Matching strategies from District A, district leaders might share details with teachers about plans to install bulletproof windows to protect against school shootings. In contrast, district leaders, including those from District B, could inform teachers of metal detector protocols (Levinsky, 2022). Across vignettes, leaders' communication advances the signification of fortification so that educators develop shared meanings of what is a "safe" school, Educational leaders and other individuals actively co-create and reinforce a shared understanding of what is a "safe" school."

The fortification of schools entails educators developing shared understandings of what is a safe school. In certain contexts, such as in schools serving a high proportion of students of color, educators hold conceptions of a "safe" school as one that employs SROs to surveil students. In District B, most teachers interpret SRO surveillance as promoting safety. In other contexts, however, educators might develop shared understandings of a safe school as one with counselors who support students with SEL, mental health, and other basic needs. Thus, the meaning of safety is contingent on social structure, and actors influenced by racialized organizational conditions may rely on different conceptualizations to steer fortification.

### **Legitimation**

Legitimation concentrates on the ways norms and routines influence structure-agency dynamics (Stones, 2005). Actors' engagement with norms can legitimate specific institutions because norms influence how people work together on school security issues, and how they create structures of fortification (Giddens, 1979). The practices of administrators, teachers, and others shape what is deemed legitimate for school safety (Bell, 2021). In addition, the legitimation of fortification has altered the appropriateness of school safety practices, including conducting active shooter drills and placing armed SROs inside school buildings (O'Regan, 2019). Simply stated, what was once inconceivable (i.e., active shooter drills with fake blood) has become a legitimate response to gun violence in schools. Leaders, teachers, SROs, students, and other actors play roles in creating, spreading, promoting, or rejecting norms that legitimize fortification.

Crucially, legitimation shapes the norms of what should happen in a safe school. Similar to the approaches depicted in District B, and in many schools, it is deemed appropriate for SROs to search and arrest students (Bell, 2021; Ryan et al., 2017). It has also become normalized for administrators to facilitate realistic lockdown drills and develop educators' first aid skills (e.g., how to use a tourniquet to stop bleeding from gunshot wounds) to protect people, like in District A's schools (Levinsky, 2022; Mendez, 2019). In sum, fortification has fostered new school norms for implementing school security policies.

Across various district and school contexts, there are differences in the norms of fortification and associated routines for keeping schools safe from gun violence, ranging from interacting with police officers (as hinted in District B) to practicing lockdown drills (as noted in District A). These norms and routines are racialized because racist structures, beliefs, and biases influence which routines are deemed legitimate in a specific context (Morris, 2016). Micro-level agency, too, influences the legitimation of school security policies and practices. Legitimation deepens as educators actively, and repeatedly, carry out safety practices or routines. School leaders and other actors in the education system) have discretion as to how they implement safety routines, including writing referrals, performing intruder drills, and hiring SROs. Thus, racist schemas and biases influence how a range of educators conduct security routines (Morris, 2016).

### **Domination**

Domination structures are constituted by ground-level actors making decisions about resources for maintaining school safety. Due to inequitable funding for schools and other social services, racism affects the domination structures of fortification (Horsford et al., 2018; Ray, 2019; Shedd, 2015). For instance, with dilapidated school buildings and lower salaries for teachers, urban districts are chronically underfunded. Therefore, as exemplified by District B, power and resources may be used to treat students as instigators of gun violence (Hirschfield, 2008). In other settings, power and resources may be used to protect more deserving students from external gun violence as portrayed in District A. Across contexts, power and resources play roles in strengthening racialized structures of fortification to surveil or protect students.

Individuals wield power while allocating resources for fortification. Actors' agency as well as their resources contribute to forming and reinforcing structures of domination (see Table 2; Giddens, 1979; Stones, 2005). Policymakers and district leaders wield their power to achieve desired outcomes regarding fortification. For example, while developing budgets, policymakers and administrators, guided by militarization logic, may work to ensure there is funding for metal detectors and SROs (Turner & Beneke, 2020). In other contexts, leaders functioning within a transformative logic framework deploy their power to earmark funds for professional development on responsive and restorative school discipline, or for hiring counselors to support the mental health needs of students. As leaders strategically wield power and resources, they deepen fortification in particular ways.

### **Discussion and Implications**

Fortification revolves around the characteristics and (un)intended consequences of target-hardening schools to prevent gun violence. Fortification is a potent construct for more fully understanding the implementation of school security policies and practices. We shed light on several critical characteristics of fortification. First, racism is entwined with both the structures and the activities of fortification. That is, systemic racism, in tandem with policies, resources, and logics, racialize fortification inside schools (Diem & Welton, 2020; Ray, 2019). People—including principals, SROs, teachers, and students and families—bring racial biases into their efforts to design and implement school security

policy. As a result, the same state or district security policy can be implemented in vastly different ways in a school enrolling predominately white students as compared to a school enrolling predominately students of color.

Second, fortification is an ongoing organizational process inside districts and schools. Ultimately, people holding different levels of power continually make decisions and implement activities associated with school-hardening efforts (Irby & Coney, 2021). Indeed, the discretion of leaders, teachers, staff, and SROs can deepen—or dismantle—fortification (Donaldson & Woulfin, 2018). Agency, therefore, shapes the racialized enactment and consequences of fortification.

### **Future Research on Fortification and School Safety**

This article puts forth a framework concentrating on how people and structures shape the securitization of U.S. schools over the past three decades. It remains necessary to empirically examine fortification in the education field. First, we encourage qualitative and quantitative research on meanings of fortification (signification), the norms and routines associated with fortification (legitimation), and examinations on how leaders martial power to deepen fortification (domination). Broadening Fisher and Hennessy's (2016) request for additional research on the mechanisms driving the relationship between SROs and student outcomes, we encourage attention to the daily activities of individuals responsible for instituting the regulations or systems of school security. Additionally, scholars should document students' and families' perceptions of and experiences with fortification, such as lockdown drills and metal detectors. This type of research would advance our understanding of how families from different demographic groups and different racial identities conceptualize efforts to prevent gun violence on school campuses.

Second, scholars should continue applying racialized organizational theory alongside Critical Race Theory (CRT) to study racialized elements of school safety policy and practice. The lens of CRT would foreground issues of race and power as the education system grapples with gun violence (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Horsford et al., 2018; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2006). Further, CRT would facilitate an understanding of fortification's historical roots in addition to how people of color navigate and negotiate various types of school security policies.

Third, as the U.S. education system is chronically under-resourced, we encourage a cost-benefit analysis research on investments in fortification (Atchison, 2020; Levin et al., 2017). This line of research could help state and district leaders make evidence-based decisions regarding security policies, systems, devices, and technology. It could also offer necessary evidence regarding the benefits of allocating additional funding towards students' mental health and socio-emotional learning rather than hardening school campuses.

Finally, researchers should map the organizational field of school security by asking the following: Who are key actors in the school security field? What logics and resources do they wield to advance particular changes? Lastly, what governance structures steer their efforts to make schools more safe? Such a line of inquiry would advance our understanding of how state and district educational leaders engage with various actors on gun violence

prevention; how leaders learn about security strategies; and how various ties among actors shape fortification.

### **Implications for Theory and Practice**

We also offer recommendations for theory and practice connected to issues of fortification. First, we encourage scholars to continue grappling with how to investigate issues of agency, including actors' work routines, framing of logics, and adaptations to the structures of school safety and security (Coburn, 2016; Hallett, 2010). Further, researchers could collect and analyze evidence on how district and school leaders go rogue, modifying the regulations and procedures of school security to match local conditions. Second, we invite researchers to apply Ray's (2019) racialized organizations framework to interrogate the racialized macro-, meso-, and micro-level organizational elements interlocking with the policies and practices of school security. This approach could involve studying how anti-Black racism is woven into safety policy, how anti-Black racism influences the employment of leaders, teachers, and SROs, and how people with differing racial identities conceptualize a safe school (Diem & Welton, 2020; Morris, 2016). For example, how do families of color interpret security at school entrances as part of visitor management systems? And how does this contrast with the families of white students?

Finally, educational leaders should design and facilitate professional learning opportunities on fortification for principals, teachers, SROs, and staff. In particular, educators should engage in professional development on the intersection between security strategies and racism (Kupchik et al., 2009). We also recommend that leaders monitor school security efforts with an eye toward decreasing racial disparities and preventing unintended consequences for students, communities, and educators. As such, leaders should reflect and respond to questions such as: Who is served by enacting certain types of school security policy? How is fortification shaping students' experiences inside schools and educators' dispositions toward the profession? Finally, we encourage leaders and teachers to collaborate to address school gun violence in an equity-oriented, holistic manner.

### **Conclusion**

We define and operationalize the theoretical framework of fortification as an interplay of structure and agency in the implementation of school safety policy. In this framework, we intentionally focus on the way racialized structures (e.g., policies, district guidance, institutional logics, resources) in tandem with actors' racialized agency shape fortification (Ray, 2019). Integrating the three pillars of structuration—signification, legitimation, and domination—in educational organizations enacting gun violence prevention efforts into our framework, we elucidate the interplay of policies, conceptualizations, and the work of people. Importantly, by confronting and foregrounding the role of racism in the implementation of school security policy, we highlight how racialized organizational elements shape fortification in schools.

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