



**National Center
for School Safety**



Considerations for Social Media Monitoring & Response



SCHOOL OF
PUBLIC HEALTH
UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN



INSTITUTE FOR FIREARM
INJURY PREVENTION
UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN

Contributors

Sarah Mason, MPH Candidate
Research Assistant
National Center for School Safety

Brent Allen Miller, MA, PMP
Training Manager
National Center for School Safety

Kiera Dressler, MSW Candidate
Research Assistant
National Center for School Safety



About the National Center for School Safety

The National Center for School Safety (NCSS) is a Bureau of Justice Assistance-funded training and technical assistance center at the University of Michigan School of Public Health. As a multidisciplinary, multi-institutional center focused on improving school safety and preventing school violence, the NCSS team is composed of national leaders in criminal justice, education, social work, and public health with expertise in school safety research and practice. NCSS provides comprehensive and accessible support to Students, Teachers, and Officers Preventing (STOP) School Violence grantees and the school safety community nationwide to address today's school safety challenges. NCSS serves as the national training and technical assistance provider for the STOP School Violence Program.

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**National Center
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University of Michigan
School of Public Health
1415 Washington Heights
Ann Arbor, Michigan 48104
nc2s.org

About this Guide

Overview

As more schools become involved in social media monitoring and response, a variety of logistical, technological, and ethical challenges appear. This document highlights example practices, concerns, and methods for social media monitoring in a school setting. At the end of the document is an example of the logistical considerations one school district dealt with as they implemented a social media monitoring system.

Who is This Quick Guide For?

This document is for schools and school districts considering the implementation of technology and/or social media monitoring

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Reasons for Considering Social Media Monitoring

Access to Social Media

95% of teens have access to a smartphone, a 22% increase from 2014-2015.^[1]

Breadth of Apps and Websites

As of 2022, the five most used social media sites among teens include YouTube (95%), TikTok (67%), Instagram (62%), Snapchat (59%), Facebook (32%), and Twitter (23%).^[1]

Awareness of Activity

Goals of social media monitoring include increasing awareness of students' online activity, and better identifying and preventing potential instances of harm that may otherwise go unreported.^[2]

Identifying Risks

Companies are marketing their social media monitoring services with claims that they can identify sexual content and drug and alcohol use; prevent mass violence, self-harm, and bullying; and/or flag students who may be struggling with academic or mental health issues and need help.^[3]

What Social Media Monitoring Programs Do^[4]

Most social media monitoring programs include:

- » Real-time monitoring
- » Customizable dashboards
- » Unlimited keyword searches
- » Geo-fencing (or identifying concerning social media activity within an established geographical proximity to the school or district)
- » Notifications configured at the state, district, and school level
- » Constant expansion of sites monitored

Media monitored typically includes but is not limited to: Facebook, Twitter, TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, Reddit, Flickr, Pinterest, Blogs, Forums, and Customer Review Sites.

Many monitoring systems use keyword searching and geolocation to flag concerning posts and send reports in real time to designated school officials. These officials evaluate the concerning post and determine the best course of action according to an established school threat assessment plan.

Evidence Base for Social Media Monitoring

- » There is not currently a firm evidence base that suggests social media surveillance is able to address the public health issues that many social media surveillance services claim to be targeting, such as cyberbullying, students' mental health, and violence in schools.^[2]
- » A key concern with these technologies is that they may be vulnerable to algorithmic biases which typically disproportionately affect certain populations. Algorithms are only as accurate and effective as the data they are provided, which necessitates careful scrutiny.^[2]
- » However, a 2019 study by the University of Chicago Crime Lab showed positive outcomes in Chicago public schools that conducted social media surveillance in conjunction with targeted interventions. Outcomes included lower risk of exposure to out-of-school shooting incidents, fewer misconduct incidents, fewer out-of-school suspensions, and higher rates of school attendance.^[2]
- » Social media monitoring software is still experimental and should be carefully considered by anyone seeking to implement it.^[3]



Considerations for Schools Thinking About Monitoring Social Media

Ethical Considerations

- » It is necessary to find a balance between a student's right to privacy and the school's responsibility to provide a safe environment.^[5]
- » Social media monitoring depends on a created algorithm, which is vulnerable to human bias, and often disproportionately targets students of color.^[2]
- » Algorithms also are limited by language and cultural differences that may not be translated properly. This may result in misunderstandings or misinterpretations, affecting certain populations more than others.^[2]
- » Information typically reviewed by social media monitoring is public domain; however, harm may result from sharing students' online activity with school administrators who hold positions of power over students.^[2]
- » Punitive responses derived from automated tools disproportionately affect students of color and hinder students' ability and willingness to express themselves freely.^[6]

Ethical Framework for Introducing Social Media Monitoring

(adapted from Fleury & Dowdy, 2020)^[5]

- » Evaluate the challenges you are attempting to overcome
 - » Ensure students are protected and safe
 - » Consider the risks of violating student privacy and free speech
- » Define the potential ethical-legal issues involved
 - » Consider safety issues that may occur online
 - » Sharing of plans to do harm to others
 - » Suicidal ideation or action
 - » Cyberbullying
 - » Consider students' right to privacy and free speech
 - » Ensure cybersecurity of monitored information
 - » Avoid discrimination or targeting
- » Consult available ethical-legal guidelines, supervisors, and colleagues
- » Evaluate the rights, responsibilities, and welfare of all affected parties
- » Consider alternative strategies and the consequences of each one
- » Make the decision and take responsibility for it

Legal Considerations

- » There is no consensus regarding the legality of a school partnering with an outside organization to monitor student behavior.^[5]
- » Records developed through a third-party social media monitoring program may not fall under FERPA and therefore not legally protected from disclosure. There has been no singular decision from the Department of Education or United States judicial system as to how data pulled from social media monitoring fits into an educational record.^[7]
- » The US Supreme Court has not explicitly addressed what schools can monitor or address in an online platform; however, *Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School District* (1969) established that schools could restrict free speech on- or off-campus if the speech presented a significant disruption or material interference in the educational institution. Courts differ, however, on what can be considered a “significant disruption or material interference.”^[7]
- » *Porter v. Ascension Parish School Board* (2004) demonstrated that schools can be held liable for incorrectly determining what is considered a “true threat.”^[5]
- » Social media monitoring offers a relatively automated and efficient way to detect threats made in cyberspace, but the procedures required for tracking online activity have been questioned in regards to the Fourth Amendment, which prohibits “unreasonable searches and seizures.”^[5]

Privacy Considerations^[7]

- » Determine what the vendor’s policy is on storing data. Some may have recommendations but not strict policies or methods of enforcement. It may be the case that they comply with the laws that apply to the company but do not fully address the security or privacy expectations that educational institutions are held to.
- » Many states prohibit schools from requiring students to provide passwords to personal social media accounts; however, there is little regulation when it comes to social media information that falls in the public domain.
 - » California is one state with formal regulations. These include:
 - » Requiring school officials who plan to collect information from social media to first notify students and their guardians
 - » Allowing students to amend or delete the collected information
 - » Ensuring the information will be destroyed within a year of the student’s graduation or eighteenth birthday
 - » Strict regulation of the vendor’s storage of any collected information
- » It can be difficult to hold vendors accountable when it comes to only accessing publicly available information. Often, publicly available data can be deleted or public accounts can be made private. When that occurs, the social media monitoring report would then contain information that is no longer publicly available.



Logistical Considerations of Monitoring Technology and Social Media Use

The steps below were taken by one school district as they implemented technology and social media monitoring at the universal level (Tier I) for all students.^[1]

Step 1: Administrative Approval

Administrators assessed the claim that social media monitoring was critical for the safety of students. Specifically, they examined the data on the prevalence of mental health concerns throughout the school district.

Step 2: Selection of a Monitoring System

The selection team compared monitoring systems. They examined:

- » Cost
- » Logistic practicality
- » Kind of devices and social media platforms
- » Search methods (key word, trends, search functions, etc.)
- » Reaction time (live alert vs. summary reports)

Step 3: Defining Purpose

The selection team developed clear goals, defined boundaries (such as not deploying a social media monitoring system to serve as a disciplinary initiative), and maintained transparency and clarity of purpose throughout all stages of the process.

Step 4: Parental Consent

Parent opt-in/opt-out opportunities were provided. These opportunities were included in the district's Acceptable Technology Use policy.

Step 5: Resource Mapping and Gap Analysis

The resources needed to support identified needs were mapped. Gaps in knowledge, resources, and infrastructure were identified. Once complete, training for staff was provided to ensure familiarity with warning signs, protocols, and action plans.

Step 6: Monitoring Procedure and Support

It was imperative that the district's threat assessment team was well-prepared and supported to triage and respond to threats. Frequent training and check-ins were key, as were frequent checks on the technology being used. The district's crisis protocols were regularly reviewed and adjusted.

Additional Resources

National Center for School Safety

- » [A Quick Guide to Information Sharing During Threat Reporting & Assessment](#) - Learn when to release or withhold student information collected through reporting systems and threat assessment processes. Additionally, explore additional resources to help guide your information sharing practices. This guide is primarily intended for school personnel, SROs, school counselors, threat assessment teams, and mental health providers.
- » [Social Media Responsibility With Student Engagement](#) - This webinar discusses the consequences of increased social media usage during the COVID-19 pandemic on student mental health. Hear perspectives from a student, community-based organization leader, and a school principal. They discuss strategies for teaching students to address the mental health impacts that social media can have.

SchoolSafety.gov

- » [Cyber Safety Series: Social Media](#) - This video covers social media use and a few tips to make sure your social media experience is safe and secure.

National Institute of Justice

- » [School Safety: Research on Gathering Tips and Addressing Threats](#) - From 2014 to 2017, the National Institute of Justice (NIJ) funded several studies through its Comprehensive School Safety Initiative that address a wide range of questions about identifying and reporting threats, and school response strategies. This document summarizes some of the research conducted. Initial results indicate that although tip lines may be useful violence prevention tools, not all of them are likely to be equally successful. Tip lines should be coupled with efforts to facilitate an informed and coordinated response to the tip.

Readiness and Emergency Management for Schools (REMS) Technical Assistance (TA) Center

- » [Use of Social Media in School Behavioral Threat Assessments](#) - A collection of resources originally shared at a webinar. Topics featured include online safety and cyberbullying, threat assessments, school climate and bullying, and federal laws and regulations.

United States Department of Education

- » [Office of Educational Technology](#) - Data and resources addressing all aspects of incorporating technology in school.



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