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There are few safety phenomena that strike fear and a lack of understanding into the general public as that of the “school shooter”. While these events are rare, the instant media coverage and analysis bring feelings of inadequacy into our very living rooms. This article will attempt to explore the “school shooter” to determine if there are effective prevention/intervention techniques available to schools, communities and parents.

We probably will never actually know the reason(s) why a person believes that shooting people while at school will resolve any perceived injustices or make things right. To that end, it may be helpful to review some of the purported myths as well as the key findings of a few research studies and then make an analogy to the school setting. We can start by reviewing ten (10) myths about school shootings that were reported by the United States Secret Service and the Department of Education in a 2002 study. In this study, the researchers reviewed case files of thirty seven (37) attacks by current or former students as well as interviewed ten (10) of the perpetrators. These reported myths are:

- 1) **“He didn’t fit the profile.”** – In the study, it was concluded that there are no useful profiles or profile tools to effectively identify individuals that could possibly initiate a school shooting. Within the thirty-seven cases, the personality and social characteristics of these individuals varied greatly. Their ages ranged from eleven (11) to twenty one (21), and they came from various racial and ethnic backgrounds.
- 2) **“He just snapped.”** – It is rare that a case of “targeted violence” is an impulsive act. More often than not, these actions had been well thought out, sometimes up to two weeks (or more) in advance.
- 3) **“No one knew.”** – This is a disturbing finding in that in virtually all the studied cases, someone else knew about the idea or plan. In the majority of these cases, the other people knowing about the plan were students, friends and/or siblings. This knowledge rarely made its way outside the “code of silence” (to school officials prior to the attack). In two-thirds of the cases studied, the perpetrator acted alone, but friends or fellow students encouraged or influenced the attacker to take action in almost half of them.
- 4) **“He hadn’t threatened anyone.”** – The study takes the position that too much emphasis is placed upon actual threats. The research indicates that most attackers did not threaten. Further, most people who actually threatened did not carry out an attack.
- 5) **“He was a loner.”** – In many cases, the students who actually carried out the attack(s) were considered to be in the mainstream of the student population and were active in sports, school clubs or other activities. Only a quarter of the students hung out with a peer group that was considered to be a “fringe group.” Advanced knowledge of the attacks by other students contradicts the notion that “school shooters” are loners and that they just “snap.”
- 6) **“He was crazy.”** – The only mental health themes that emerged were a history of suicide attempts or suicidal thoughts, a history of feeling extreme depression and/or desperation. Most of the attackers in the study had difficulty dealing with significant losses or personal failures.
- 7) **“If only we’d had a SWAT team or metal detectors.”** – Most incidents were not resolved by law enforcement intervention. In fact, all of the shootings studied were quick and of short duration. Most of these incidents were stopped by school staff or the person just stopped shooting or committed suicide.
- 8) **“He had never touched a gun.”** – The research study revealed that most of the attackers had access to weapons and had used them prior to the attack. The weapons utilized in the attacks were usually obtained from the shooters’ homes or the home of a friend or relative.
- 9) **“We did everything we could to help him.”** – Continual harassment and bullying behaviors were common themes

throughout the study. While not all students bullied will resort to this severe form of retaliation, this was a factor in some of the school-based attacks.

- 10) **“School violence is rampant.”** – The media attention that gravitates to these high profile incidents makes it seem like school violence is at an all time high, when it actually is not. While there are homicides and targeted attacks on school grounds, this number has actually decreased by nearly half over the past decade. The fact is the number of children and youth victimized by school-related homicides makes up less than one percent of the total number of murders of children and youth in the United States each year.

The National School Safety Center attempts to compile an estimate of school-related homicides each year based on newspaper accounts from throughout the United States. According to that report, <http://www.schoolsafety.us/pubfiles/savd.pdf>, in 2005-2006 there were five incidents where an individual (four students and one principal) was shot and killed on school grounds. As of February 2007, there had been fifteen (15) individuals shot and killed on school grounds during the 2006-2007 school year; two of whom were students who committed suicide.

Why do School Shooters Choose to Shoot?

The short answer is, “We’re not sure.” Klein (2005) and Leary, Kowalski, Smith & Phillips (2003) reviewed hundreds of media accounts around school shootings and determined that social rejection (either real or implied), jealousy, and frustration may contribute to school shootings. Some research points to indicators of violence being present prior to the shooting incident and that were not acted upon by the adults. Often, the targets of the incidents were the ones the shooter perceived as having rejected or teased him.

The Hype: Assessing Risk

Television, print and radio media spread the news of school shootings and related violence. The threat of school violence has been reconstructed by the media, promoting a more violent and ominous threat. Anderson et al. (2001) conducted the most comprehensive study of school shootings when they examined all school-associated violent deaths in the United States from 1994-1999. They found that 164 victims died as a result of school shootings during that time period and determined that the likelihood of being victimized by a school shooting was higher in high schools and urban areas. They also determined that the annual rate of school-associated violent death (this includes all violent deaths, not just school shootings) was 0.068 per 100,000 students, or less than one in a million, during this time period. As such, although school shootings are frightening events, they remain rare events. Since school is the primary arena of adolescent social life, more acts of violence happen there due to the amount of time students spend there.

What can schools do?

The creation of a climate and culture that promotes safety, caring and a sense of well-being is absolutely essential to any prevention efforts, whether it be weapons, bullying, drugs or alcohol. Consistency is the key to creating this type of atmosphere; therefore the inclusion of all staff, parents, students and other caregivers in training and information sharing is paramount to achieving your goals. Schools should:

- 1) Encourage students to report what they see and hear;
- 2) Create an atmosphere where every student has an adult in whom they can confide;
- 3) Watch for behavior or rhetoric that may indicate that weapons are being gathered and/or stored;
- 4) Respond aggressively to bullying;
- 5) Develop the school’s crisis plan with an emphasis on prevention, rather than just response;
- 6) Practice effective access control to the school building;
- 7) Have effective sign-in procedures and enforce them; and
- 8) Avoid profiling students. As stated, the USSS/USDE research indicates that there is no effective profiling tool that will allow school administrators to effectively narrow down the field.

“Rather than trying to determine the ‘type’ of student who may engage in targeted school violence,” the researchers found that, “an inquiry should focus instead on a student’s behaviors and communications to determine if that student appears to be planning for an attack. Rather than asking whether a particular student ‘looks like’ those who have launched a school-based attack before, it is more productive to ask whether the student is engaging in behaviors that suggest preparations for an attack; if so, how fast the student is



moving toward an attack, and where intervention may be possible.” (United States Secret Service and the United States Department of Education, 2002)

Another disturbing finding in this USSS/USDE study is the fact that weapons (primarily firearms) were readily accessible to the perpetrator. Again, upon further examination, it was noted that the firearms were either obtained from home, a relative or friend’s home, or legally purchased (if the person was old enough to do so). This finding, while alarming, segues nicely into a discussion with parents regarding gun storage in the home.

A school cannot ignore any threat of violence. Plausible or not, each threat must be taken seriously and investigated. A clear, vigorous response is essential for three reasons: first and most important, to make sure that students, teachers and staff *are* safe (that is, that a threat will not be carried out); second, to assure that they will *feel* safe; and third, to assure that the person making the threat will be supervised and given the treatment that is appropriate and necessary to avoid future danger to others or himself. (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1999). Both the FBI and the USSS protocols contain a numerous similarities:

- 1) Both utilize a multidisciplinary team approach.
- 2) Both begin the process with an inquiry-based approach as opposed to making immediate referrals to law enforcement.
- 3) There is a well defined threshold at which point the inquiry information will be turned over to law enforcement for a thorough investigation.

Conclusions

It is especially important that a school not deal with threats by simply kicking the problem out the door. Expelling or suspending a student for making a threat must not be a substitute for careful threat assessment and a well thought out consistent policy of intervention. Disciplinary action alone, unaccompanied by any effort to evaluate the threat or the student’s intent, may actually exacerbate the danger. In these instances, a student may feel unfairly or arbitrarily treated and become even angrier. (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1999)

School violence is an increasingly complex issue and one that cannot be taken lightly. Schools should consider establishing well defined “Threat Assessment Teams” that have well defined roles and responsibilities. One of the most critical of these responsibilities would be to clearly understand at what point this inquiry must be referred to law enforcement. The district’s legal counsel along with law enforcement representation should be included in the establishment of these protocols. One significant point of divergence between the FBI’s approach and the USSS approach is the amount of attention given to a so called “school shooter profile.” The FBI approach adheres to the notion that there are a significant set of characteristics that would form a profile while the USSS approach adheres to the philosophy that there is no useful profiling system that would assist schools in their efforts.

What do we know?

We know that as long as schools continue to have students between the ages of five and twenty-one that there will continue to be threats that will need to be evaluated. In the area of “school shooters”, schools should have a systematic approach in place in order to quickly make a determination as to whether the threat is real and therefore requiring a law enforcement referral or that it is not. Schools will continue to deal with lower level threats, but in the case of the school shooter (when evidence is compelling enough) these must be referred to the local law enforcement. There must be a climate and culture present whereby students feel comfortable in breaking the code of silence and adults within that school know how to react when receiving this information.

Stop it



Before it Starts

- 1) **Encourage students to report what they see and hear.** – Clearly, this is a culture and climate issue that must be fostered over time in a school. In addition to this, there must be venues for students to report their concerns or findings, such as drop boxes, tip lines, e-mails etc. There should be multiple venues; some anonymous, others not.
- 2) **Each student should have an adult in whom they can confide.** – This finding is absolutely essential to an overall safe and caring school environment. One of the questions that we ask students during the Safe School Assessment process (Kentucky Center for School Safety Assessment process) is, “Do you have an adult at this school that you can talk to during times of crisis or if you have safety concerns?” Alarming, these numbers are starting to decline which is a “red flag” to the overall trust, climate and culture of that school. During a three year period (2003-04 through 2005-06) the findings indicated that one in four students (25%) did not feel comfortable confiding in adult at their school.
- 3) **Respond aggressively to bullying.** – While interviewing school shooters, the topic of bullying and harassment made its way into the conversation. Many of the shooters indicated that there had been a long history of being harassed or bullied. Sometimes this bullying or harassment continued for years. Schools should take a critical look at their bullying policies and intervention plans, as this type of behavior should not be allowed to go unchecked.
- 4) **Practice good access control to the school building.** – This particular finding is an inexpensive strategy to prevent unwanted visitors from walking freely into a school. The premise to this strategy is to secure all exterior entrance doors after a certain hour (usually when students are released to homeroom) requiring all visitors, staff and students to enter through a prescribed and celebrated entrance (usually the front door). Signage should be prominently displayed, clearly directing visitors to the entrance of the building. Students and staff should be trained regarding the importance of this strategy so that they will not prop doors open and/or let other people in thereby nullifying the positive affects of this effort.
- 5) **Have good sign-in procedures and enforce them.** – While this strategy seems so simple, it is one that is simply overlooked or not enforced in a large portion of our schools. There are many reasons why the signing in and the provision of a visitor’s tag is important. A few of the main reasons are to: allow for clear identification as to who is staff and who is not; provide an opportunity for staff and students to question someone who might not have completed the sign in process; and give the school a record of who has visited, when and the purpose of their visit.