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Alone and adrift: The association between mass school shootings, school size, and student support

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ABSTRACT

Background: School shootings have approached epidemic levels in recent years. While mental illness is undoubtedly involved in nearly all cases of mass school violence, we sought to determine how environmental context may exacerbate preexisting personal factors. The present study investigated the associations between mass school shootings, school enrollment size, student–teacher ratios, and student transitions.

Method: Our sample consisted of twenty-two mass school shooting cases between January 1995 and June 2014. Information about school shootings was gathered using preexisting school shooting databases and news media reports. Using state and national databases, data regarding school size and student–teacher ratios of incident schools were collected. Information about schools where shooters previously attended, as well as state average school statistics, were also obtained.

Findings: Schools where mass shootings occurred had significantly higher enrollments than their state average counterparts. Additionally, students who committed a mass school shooting were significantly more likely to have previously attended a school with a smaller student body and/or a lower than state average student–teacher ratio.

Conclusion: Our findings are consistent with previous literature indicating that smaller schools are less likely to experience acts of mass violence. Additionally, our results suggest that transitioning from a smaller, more supportive school to a larger, more anonymous school may exacerbate preexisting mental health issues among potential school shooters. The results of this study have significant implications for educational policy reform.

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1. Introduction

Mass school shootings have become increasingly prevalent over the last twenty years. In fact, Agnich (2015) reports that the number of mass school shootings nearly doubled in the thirty years spanning from 1981 to 2010. Despite thoughtful and strategic attempts to implement

policies preventing school violence, reports of school shootings, stabbings, and beatings have continued. This suggests that there may be parts of the larger context of mass school-based violence that are not being considered. While mass school violence is a rare occurrence and accounts for less than one percent of all annual homicides of youth ages five to eighteen (Borum, Cornell, Modzeleski, & Jimerson, 2010; Modzeleski et al., 2008) its ramifications are so severe that it necessitates further investigation.

Research on mass school violence began in earnest in the 1990s, the decade in which the tragic shootings at Columbine High School, Thurston High School, and West-side Middle School took place. Between these three mass

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shootings, 24 students were killed and nearly 80 students were injured. While school violence dates back much further than the 1990s and encompasses a more diverse range of interpersonal harm, mass school shootings continue to mark one of the rarest, albeit most horrific, subsets of violent school incidents.

Despite recent research efforts, mass school shootings remain one of the least understood types of school violence. Previous work has indicated that mass school violence is markedly different from other types of school violence that involve interpersonal disputes or are related to criminal behaviors such as drug dealing and gang violence (Agnich, 2015; Casella, 2001; Flores de Apodaca, Brighton, Perkins, Jackson, & Steege, 2012; Kimmel, 2008; Verlienden, Hersen, & Thomas, 2000). While school violence occurs more frequently in low-income, urban schools that are populated mostly by students of color, research has shown that the vast majority of these incidents are rooted in interpersonal disputes and usually only involve a small number of students (Kimmel & Mahler, 2003; Muschert, 2007; Rocque, 2012). On the other hand, mass school violence is more frequently characterized by a white, middle-class male(s) entering a rural/suburban school with the intention of harming a large number of individuals who hold symbolic value, and/or are usually more socially distant from the shooter (Kimmel & Mahler, 2003; Newman, 2004; Rocque, 2012; Thompson & Kyle, 2005). Unpredictable and fatally destructive events such as these help to explain why so many students feel unsafe at school on a daily basis (Kingery, Coggeshall, & Alford, 1998).

Following the horrific shootings of the 1990s (e.g., Columbine, Jonesboro), a number of task forces were created through the Secret Service, the Department of Education, and other governmental agencies, with the purpose of researching and preventing school violence. Previous scientific investigations of mass school violence have focused primarily on describing the characteristics of individual perpetrators (Fein et al., 2002; Leary, Kowalski, Smith, & Phillips, 2003; O'Toole, 1999). These studies have sought to construct a specific profile of individual(s) at greatest risk for committing an act of mass violence at their school. In spite of failing to deliver a single predictive profile of a school shooter, this line of inquiry has been quite successful in identifying a number of consistent qualities among most school shooters. For example, nearly all perpetrators are male and have a history of mental illness and/or familial instability (Farrington, 2007; Flores de Apodaca et al., 2012; Harding, Fox, & Mehta, 2002; Thompson & Kyle, 2005). Additionally, the vast majority of school shooters report feelings of exclusion, social isolation, rejection, and even abuse at the hands of peers (Böckler, Seeger, Sitzler, & Heitmeyer, 2011; Farrington, 2007; Harding et al., 2002; Leary et al., 2003; Rocque, 2012). Peer-to-peer conflicts are particularly impactful for middle and high school students, as adolescents begin to shift their focus from parent support to peer networks during this period of development. As a result, adolescents consistently show a heightened sensitivity to peer evaluations, and feel instances of social exclusion more deeply (Somerville, 2013). Thus, although parental relationships remain important throughout development, peer interactions may be the most important

predictors of long-term social and emotional stability during the teen years (Brown, 2004; Levin & Madfis, 2009).

Although the aforementioned retrospective studies have generated reasonable and consistent explanations for why students commit acts of mass violence within their schools, they have not been particularly useful in predicting future school shootings. Psychopathology and access to firearms have been the focus of much study and controversy in the discussion of school violence. Though these factors are undoubtedly involved in nearly all cases of school shootings (Fein et al., 2002; Langman, 2011), they similarly lack considerable predictive value. For example, while factors such as mental illness, access to firearms, prior victimization, and rejection are consistently cited as perpetrator characteristics, many school-aged children possess some, or even all, of these risk factors and yet only an infinitesimal percentage of these students commit acts of mass violence. In other words, due to the complexity of the personal, environmental, and situational differences that accompany acts of mass violence, at present no combination of risk factors can definitively predict whether a violent incident will actually occur. By definition, any type of risk factor analysis is merely an evaluation of the likelihood that a specific phenomenon will occur. One might think of a risk factor analysis in terms of a balloon. Each risk and protective factor affects an individual differently. No single risk factor can fill the balloon entirely with air, and other protective factors might deflate the balloon slightly; however, a combination of factors can fill the balloon to its maximum capacity until it eventually pops.

While the discovery of a reliably predictive formula for school shootings is highly unlikely, expansion of potential risk factor analyses would provide greater predictive value and could potentially aid in the creation of environments that are less conducive to school violence. Though numerous researchers have studied individual factors associated with school violence, few have examined the effects of the environmental contexts in which school shootings take place. The sparse literature that exists has indicated that school violence is significantly more likely to occur at schools with higher enrollment and larger student-teacher ratios (DeVoe et al., 2003; Flores de Apodaca et al., 2012; Kaiser, 2005). Larger schools with less faculty support may precipitate violent behaviors due to a number of characteristics associated with these school environments; however, issues of anonymity and support may be the factors of greatest import.

By virtue of one's placement within a large group setting, students attending schools with high enrollments may be more likely to experience feelings of anonymity. The idea that physical and emotional distance between individuals significantly affects behavior has been explored frequently in the literature. Many researchers have found that altruistic behaviors decrease as social proximity decreases, as exemplified by the fact that individuals are more likely to help close friends or family members than they are strangers (Fry, 2008; Rachlin & Jones, 2008). Previous work also indicates that empathy, which may be inversely correlated with social distance, is a significant inhibitor of violent aggression (Björkqvist, Österman, & Kaukianinen, 2000; Jolliffe & Farrington, 2004; Miller &

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