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School shootings: Making sense of the senseless

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ABSTRACT

School shootings have altered the patina of seclusion and safety that once characterized public and higher education. Callous and brutal, school shootings seem to make no sense. However, case comparisons and anecdotal reports are beginning to show patterns that provide clues for understanding both the individual factors motivating shooting events and the characteristics of schools where shootings have occurred. We describe these factors and characteristics as the bases for six prevention strategies: (a) strengthening school attachment, (b) reducing social aggression, (c) breaking down codes of silence, (d) establishing screening and intervention protocols for troubled and rejected students, (e) bolstering human and physical security, and (6) increasing communication within educational facilities and between educational facilities and local resources.

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1. Introduction

Shootings at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, at Westside Middle School in Jonesboro, Arkansas, at an Amish school in Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania, and at dozens of other elementary, middle, and high schools across the country have shaken a fundamental belief that children are safe in school. Coupled with incidents in 2007 at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University (hereafter Virginia Tech), where 32 students were killed, and in 2008 at Northern Illinois University in Dekalb, Illinois, where five students died, shootings in educational settings have galvanized media attention. Once thought to be profoundly safe places, schools and universities must now consider the unthinkable — that someone might enter campus and attempt to harm students and faculty.

School shootings are not new phenomena. They date back to at least 1974, when an 18-year-old honor student set off his school's fire alarm and then shot at the janitors and firefighters who responded to the alarm (Vossekuil, Fein, Reddy, Borum, & Modzeleski, 2002). Although rates of school violence declined steadily in the 1990s, several highly publicized school shootings, involving multiple homicides in both public and higher education settings, have raised concerns that current procedures may be insufficient to ensure the safety of school and university environments.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the nature of school shootings, an extreme form of school violence. We place emphasis on public secondary education but, where possible, we draw inferences to shootings in higher education. We discuss the individual characteristics of perpetrators and the vulnerabilities of schools where shootings have occurred. The paper concludes by reviewing plausible prevention strategies.

1.1. The prevalence of school shootings

The School-Associated Violent Deaths Study (SAVD) conducted by the Centers for Disease Control reports that between 1992 and 2006, rates of school homicides involving a single victim decreased, while rates of school homicides involving more than one victim (multiple-victim homicides) remained stable (Centers for Disease Control [CDC], 2008). Other studies report similar declines in single-victim incidents, but note that there was an increase in multiple-victim incidents between 1992 and 1999 (Anderson et al., 2001; Department of Health and Human Services [DHHS], 2001). The SAVD study found that during the period from July 1999 to June 2006, 116 students were killed in 109 school-associated events. Of these homicides, 65% included gunshot wounds, and eight involved more than one victim. Seventy-eight percent of these events occurred on an elementary, middle, or high school campus (CDC, 2008). SAVD did not include homicides occurring on college and university campuses. Although data suggest that shootings are no more prevalent today than 10 years ago, recent mass shooting events resulting in many deaths have drawn attention to the possibility of violence in school settings; and they have heightened public concern that students and teachers are especially vulnerable to violent acts (e.g., Kiefer, 2005).

On balance, school shootings are rare occurrences, and, because they have a low prevalence, they are hard to study using the survey and observational methods that characterize much developmental science and criminology. Based largely on retrospective case analyses, and drawing more broadly on theories of aggressive behavior and delinquency, various perspectives on school violence have been advanced to explain shootings. One perspective suggests that violent messages in popular songs, video games, television shows, and movies increase aggressive behavior, reduce normative constraints, and promote violence (Anderson & Bushman, 2001; Newman, 2004; Robinson, Wilde, Navracruz, Farish Haydel, & Varady, 2001). Another perspective focuses on the intersection of developmental risk factors for aggressive behavior and school environments where policies and practices create—often inadvertently—social dynamics that reinforce exclusion and hostility (Farmer, Farmer, Estell, & Hutchins, 2007; Hyman & Perone, 1998; Thompson & Kyle, 2005). Still other perspectives based on social learning and deviancy training theories argue that media coverage of high profile shooting incidents, such as Columbine and Virginia Tech, creates a contagion effect, stimulating those at risk of perpetrating a school shooting to imitate the actions of other school shooters (Newman, 2004; O'Toole, 2000). Thus, because shootings are low-frequency phenomena, understanding them is often placed in the theoretical context of more prevalent forms of violence.

To be sure, violence in schools is usually defined more than school shootings. During the 2005–2006 academic year (AY), 78% of public schools experienced one or more violent incidents, with 17% experiencing one or more serious violent incidents. Serious violent incidents include rape, sexual battery other than rape, physical attack or fight with a weapon, threat of physical attack with a weapon, and robbery with or without a weapon (U.S. Department of Education, 2007). In a recent report, 6% percent of students ages 12 to 18 years reported that they were afraid of either being attacked at school or on the way to and from school (CDC, 2005a). Fear is more prevalent among younger, urban, and minority students (Cully, Conkling, Emshoff, Blakely, & Gorman, 2006). Often used as an indicator of the risk for school violence, the percentage of students who carry any weapon to school, including guns, increased from 17.1% to 18.5% in 2005 (CDC, 2005b); however, during the same year, students who carried a gun to school decreased from 6.1% to 5.4% (CDC, 2005a). These data included students who carried weapons for self-protection. Therefore, although carrying a weapon poses a greater risk for violence, it may not represent intent to victimize others.

Even though school violence is not rare, acts of serious violence in schools, such as shootings, are infrequent and the risk of violent victimization appears to be decreasing (DeVoe, Peter, Noonan, Snyder, & Baum, 2005). In the AY 1999–2000, 20% of students reported experiencing a serious violent incident (U.S. Department of Education, 2005) compared to 17% in AY 2005–2006 (U.S. Department of Education, 2007). The odds that a high-school student will be a victim of homicide or commit suicide in school are no greater than 1 in 1 million (Vossekuil et al., 2002), and school-related homicides comprise only 1% of all homicides in the United States (CDC, 2006). However, although shootings are statistically rare, polls report that more than 50% of parents with school-age children and 75% of high-school students believe that a school shooting could happen in their communities (e.g., Juvonen, 2001; Kiefer, 2005).

2. Following Columbine

Following the tragedy at Columbine High School in 1999, the U.S. Secret Service and U.S. Department of Education commissioned the Safe School Initiative, a collaborative study that examined 37 shootings occurring in U.S. schools between 1974 and 2000 (Vossekuil et al., 2002). The Safe School final report examined behavioral factors involved in school shootings, and attempted to identify risk factors for

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