



School barricaded captive-taking: A literature review and critique

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ABSTRACT

Although schools are among the safest places for children and youth, they are the occasional site of violent behavior. One form of violence is the barricaded-hostage event. In this article, the authors review the research literature pertaining to these events. Specifically, studies examining the impact on direct and indirect victims, and responders to these events, are presented and critiqued. Recommendations for future research are also made, followed by a summary and conclusions.

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1. Introduction

Captive-taking is one of the most traumatic forms of interpersonal violence (Daniels, Royster, Vecchi, & Pshenishny, 2010; Quarles, 1989). The

captives lose all sense of freedom and volition to an individual or group that may kill them should they become too troublesome. During captivity there is tremendous uncertainty about what will happen. Will the captive live? Will she or he be beaten or tortured? The outcome also is usually outside of the captive's control. Will negotiators successfully secure the captives' release, or will there be a gunfight? Will the captives survive if there is in fact a gunfight during a rescue attempt?

There are multiple contexts in which captive-taking occurs (see Daniels et al., 2010). Internationally, many incidents are hostage-

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takings¹ wherein groups or individuals are taken to bargain for religious, ideological, or political concessions. These incidents may be perpetrated by states or rogue organizations. Domestically, captive-takings range from domestic disputes to workplace violence, parental kidnappings, or prison riots/hostage events. It is unfortunate, but occasionally schools become the location of captive-takings, both domestic and international. From little-known incidents of a student coming into a classroom and holding one or more people captive for a few minutes, to the grand-scale events such as that which occurred in Beslan, Ossetia, schools are not immune from this form of violence. Domestically,² the majority of school captive-taking events have been perpetrated by students (Daniels et al., 2010), with a few exceptions. Some of these notable exceptions include an incident that occurred in the small community of Bailey, Colorado; the Amish school tragedy in West Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania; and a principal held hostage by a man in Pine Plains, New York. The event in Colorado has been well-studied, including case studies of the state's mental health crisis response unit (Crepeau-Hobson & Summers, 2011), the impact of the event on the school community (Daniels, Bilsky, & Wassif, 2011), and the principal's efforts to help the school recover (Dishman, Lewis, & Pepper, 2011).

2. Search strategy and purpose

Our search for research on school captive-taking events involved two primary methods. First, we conducted searches of popular research databases, including EBSCO Host's Criminal Justice Abstracts, Education Research Compete, and PsycInfo. Search strings included *school & hostage* and *school & barricade*. Second, while reading the articles identified through the first method, we highlighted any citations that did not come up in the previous search. We then obtained these additional articles, again searching for novel sources. Articles were not included if they were not research-based or terms were misapplied. Many news articles, for example, argue that a school is being "held hostage" by a school board or some other group.

The purpose of this article is to review the research and related literature pertaining to school captive-taking. We begin by presenting definitions of important terms, including captive-taking, hostage-taking, barricade captive-taking, and kidnapping. Next, we review the literature that examines the impact of school captive-taking on the victims, both direct and indirect, followed by a critique of this research. We then describe the research on responders' reactions to school captive-takings, including events that were resolved successfully, and case studies. Again, we offer a critique of this research. We end with recommendations for future research to better understand, prevent/mitigate, prepare for, respond to, and recover from this form of school violence.

Actual numbers of school captive-taking events in the US are difficult to ascertain, with estimates ranging from an average of three per year (Daniels et al., 2010) to as many as 20 in 1988 alone (Quarles, 1989). The difficulty relates to (1) the methods of reporting; (2) school administrators being hesitant to report violent crime (Trump, 2000); and (3) confusion of terms that permeates the news. In this section we address the latter issue by presenting definitions of key terms that are used throughout this article.

3. Definitions of key terms

3.1. Captive, captive-taking

A captive is anyone who is unlawfully taken or abducted by another person or group. The captive may be taken against his/her will (as is the case in most captive-takings), but also may go willfully, yet unlawfully

(as in a parental kidnapping). Captive-taking, then, is the act of unlawfully taking another person or group and holding them.

3.2. Hostage, hostage-taking

A hostage is a captive who is being held for instrumental reasons. This means the hostage is being used as leverage to influence a third party (McMains & Mullins, 2006). Common instrumental motives include money, release of political prisoners, or assurance of a safe passage for the hostage-taker. The school hostage-barricade situation in Beslan, Ossetia is an example of this type of captive-taking; the terrorists demanded release of political prisoners in Russia in exchange for the hostages. Hostage-taking involves the unlawful taking or confinement of one or more people with the intent of using them for bargaining. This type of incident has also been termed a barricaded hostage crisis (Vecchi, Van Hasselt, & Romano, 2005). The use of the word *barricaded* suggests that the location of the hostages and hostage-takers is known, but police or military responders are unable to easily breach the barricade for a rescue.

3.3. Victim, barricaded captive-taking

In a barricaded captive-taking (also known as a barricaded crisis event; Vecchi et al., 2005), the intent is not instrumental, but expressive. That is, the captive-taker does not intend to use the captives as a bargaining chip, but is instead expressing intense emotions and likely intends to harm the captive (Vecchi et al., 2005). Because of this different motive, the captives are referred to as victims rather than hostages. An example of this type of event is the one that occurred at the Amish schoolhouse in West Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania in 2006, where the perpetrator was apparently expressing deep-seeded anger with God.

3.4. Kidnapping

Generally in a kidnapping event, one or more people are taken unlawfully, as in a hostage-taking, but their location is unknown. They are then usually used for ransom or some other instrumental reason, although in some incidents they are then forced into bondage (such as the abduction of Elizabeth Smart, who was to serve as the "wife" of one of the kidnappers).

4. Impact on victims

Much of the research on school captive-taking has examined the impact of these events on the victims. This research has looked at the effects on both direct (those who were held captive) and indirect victims (others in the school, parents/guardians, etc.). In our search we found seven articles reporting on the effects of school captive-taking events on victims (Jessee, Strickland, & Ladewig, 1992; Moscardino, Scrimin, Capello, Altoè, & Axia, 2008; Parfitt, 2004; Pope, Campbell, & Kurtz, 1992; Scrimin et al., 2006; Vetter et al., 2010; Vila, Porche, & Mouren-Simeoni, 1999).

One of the two earliest published articles we found was a descriptive study of the effectiveness of a PTSD intervention on children who had been held captive in their school (Pope et al., 1992). In the incident, a heavily-armed high school student held 40 students hostage in a sixth-grade classroom for 5 h. His demands included a bus and \$3000, which he was going to use to leave the country. In response to this event, the authors reported on the effectiveness of an interdisciplinary strategy to work with traumatized children. The intervention had two aims: To provide factual information about the event, thereby limiting rumors and fears, and to identify and begin to treat students suffering from PTSD. The majority of the article described the support groups offered to both middle- and high-school students. The middle school students in the group were indirect victims

¹ See below for definitions of terms such as hostage-taking and barricaded captive-taking.

² We refer to domestic events as those occurring within the United States.

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