

Merrill Davis
Education Law & Policy
Professor Kaufman

School Shootings: Identifying Traits of Perpetrators & How To Most Effectively Prevent Them

I. INTRODUCTION

School shootings have recently been described as an “epidemic” plaguing the United States.¹ Schools have been tasked with keeping their environments safe while not inhibiting the constitutional protections guaranteed to students.² In support of the state and school’s interest in a safe environment, the Gun-Free Schools Act of 1994 was enacted in 1994. This Act makes the disbursement of federal funds to states contingent on the state enacting a law, which expels students who bring weapons to school for at least one year.³ In order to better protect schools from violence, many schools have enacted dress codes, conducted searches and seizures of students and their property, implemented metal detectors, and stricter discipline in general.⁴ While the Gun-Free Schools Act of 1994 and these additional school regulations are a good start, they do little to prevent imminent danger in schools regarding the use of weapons and mass-killings in schools.

In 2012, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention released facts relating to school violence among youth in grades nine through twelve.⁵ The facts indicate that 5.4 percent of students reported carrying a gun, knife, or club on school property on one or more days in the 30

¹ Philip T.K. Daniel, *Violence and the Public Schools: Student Rights Have Been Weighed in the Balance and Found Wanting*, 27 J.L. & EDUC. 573, 573 (1998); see Stephanie Verlinden et al., *Risk Factors in School Shootings*, 20 CLINICAL PSYCH. REV. 3, 3 (2000) (noting that describing school shootings as an “epidemic” has promoted fear throughout the communities).

² Daniel, *supra* note 1, at 575.

³ 20 U.S.C. § 8921 (West 1997).

⁴ Daniel, *supra* note 1, at 575.

⁵ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Youth Violence: Facts at a Glance (2012), available at http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/yv_datasheet_2012-a.pdf.

days preceding the survey.⁶ Additionally, during the 2009–2010 school year, 17 homicides of school-age youth ages 5 to 18 occurred at school.⁷

More recently, on December 14, 2012, 20-year-old Adam Lanza went on a shooting rampage at Sandy Hook Elementary School, killing 20 first-grade children, and six educators.⁸ Sandy Hook Elementary routinely practiced lockdown procedures and safety drills⁹— but unfortunately, even practice could not prepare the children and teachers for horrific events that would occur on that day. This event alone surpassed the number of students killed in the 2009–2010 school year nationwide, evidencing that a single event could claim many, many lives and have immense consequences.

It is imperative that schools do everything in their power to identify students who pose a threat to the school, and eradicate those threats before that student or students' intentions become a reality. While school shootings are rare events, they are involving more and more victims per incident¹⁰ and are a constant concern among students, teachers, administrators, and staff. Although no method of identifying potential school shooters and preventing school shootings is foolproof, this paper will argue that school shootings can be greatly reduced by: (1) students, teachers, and school administrators maintaining a keen eye for signs of potential future violence by students, (2) schools increasing the presence of school resource officers, (3) schools enacting a threat assessment strategy that also addresses mental health concerns, and (4) parents and relatives limiting the access of weapons to students.

⁶ *Id. citing* Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance—United States (2011), available at www.cdc.gov/mmwr/pdf/ss/ss6104.pdf.

^{7 7} *Id. citing* Simone Robers et al., Indicators of School Crime and Safety: 2011, National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education and Bureau of Justice Statistics (2012) available at <http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2012/2012002.pdf>.

⁸ After Newtown: A Look at School Safety, 52 CURRICULUM REV. 3, 3 (2013).

⁹ *Id.*

¹⁰ Verlinden, *supra* note 1, at 5.

While this article is not exhaustive, and there are many other identifying factors of perpetrators, as well as ways to approach school safety, it does provide some in-depth insight into both areas. Part II of this article attempts to identify those who are most likely to commit violence within schools, even though there is no single profile.¹¹ Part III discusses the most effective ways in which to mitigate and help prevent school shootings to the greatest extent possible.¹² Finally, Part VI concludes by reiterating the importance of school resource officers and threat assessment strategies in schools as well as the importance of limiting access of guns to students.¹³

II. IDENTIFYING THE USUAL PERPETRATORS OF SCHOOL VIOLENCE

While profiling and painting a picture of particular students likely to carry out attacks on their own school and classmates is quite difficult and may dangerously exclude some from the sight of other students, teachers, and administrators, doing so is extremely important to the process of maintaining the safety of our schools. School shootings almost always involve male perpetrators.¹⁴ Testimony presented to the House Judiciary Committee after the shooting at Columbine High School noted that typical school shooters are often lonely and isolated, highly sensitive to teasing and bullying, and resentful over perceived injustices.¹⁵ Studies indicate that peer rejection and aggressive behavior are related, and once this aggression in students begins, it

¹¹ See *infra* Part III.

¹² See *infra* Part III.

¹³ See *infra* Part IV.

¹⁴ Mark R. Leary et al., *Teasing, Rejection, and Violence: Case Studies of the School Shootings*, 29 *AGGRESSIVE BEHAVIOR* 202, 213 (2003); Jung Sung Hong et al., *Revisiting the Virginia Tech Shootings: An Ecological Systems Analysis*, 15 *JOURNAL OF LOSS AND TRAUMA* 561, 563 (2010).

¹⁵ Leary et al., *supra* note 14, at 202–03 (2003); see Bryan L. Warnick, et al., *Tragedy and the Meaning of School Shootings*, 60 *EDUC. THEORY* 371, 373 (2010) (discussing that in a study conducted by Jonathan Fast in the book *Ceremonial Violence: A Psychological Explanation of School Shooting* determined school shooters were often bullied at school); see also Preventing School Shootings: A Summary of a U.S. Secret Service Safe School Initiative Report, 248 *NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF JUSTICE* 11, 14 (2002) [hereinafter Preventing School Shootings] (noting that a number of school shooters studied had experienced bullying and harassment that were longstanding and severe); Verlinden, *supra* note 1, at 44 (similar).

intensifies over time.¹⁶ Targets of bullying recognize that the perpetrators do not like, value or accept them and also feel public humiliation since acts of bullying often occur in the presence of others.¹⁷ A study conducted, focusing on 15 cases of school violence from 1995–2001 (including Columbine), yielded fascinating results.¹⁸ The study concluded that in at least 12 of the 15 cases analyzed, the shooter(s) had been subjected to ongoing malicious teasing or bullying,¹⁹ and in at least half of the cases, the perpetrator(s) had “experienced a recent rejecting event.”²⁰ Additionally, the shooters typically fit one or more of the other three risk factors investigated: (1) psychological problems (10 of the 15 incidents), (2) an interest in guns and explosives (6 of the 15 incidents), and (3) a fascination with death (4 of the incidents).²¹ The study further suggested that it is probably rejection in addition to one or more of these other risk factors that increases the risk that a student will perpetrate violence against other students, teachers, or administrators.²²

Additionally, a summary of a U.S. Secret Service Safe School Initiative Report emphasized that in more than three-fourths of the cases examined, young people intending to carry out “targeted violence” told at least one other person about their plan before it was carried out.²³ However, in nearly all of the cases, the person told about the future attack did not relay that information to an adult.²⁴ One study indicated that “[t]here was a lack of expressed concern among those who knew the school assailants that they would act on their threats. In all cases [in

¹⁶ Leary et al., *supra* note 14, at 203.

¹⁷ *Id.*

¹⁸ *Id.* 202–214. All of the school shootings in this case study the shooting incident occurred at a school during the school day and were perpetrated by students and resulted in injury or death to at least one student yielded fascinating results. *Id.* at 204–05.

¹⁹ *Id.* at 210.

²⁰ *Id.*

²¹ *Id.*

²² *Id.* at 211.

²³ Preventing School Shootings, *supra* note 15, at 11. The study further noted that the “other person” told of the plan is usually a friend, schoolmate, or sibling. *Id.*

²⁴ *Id.* at 12.

this study] there was a failure of peers to report threats of serious violence and of peers, parents, and professionals to consider them seriously.”²⁵

Furthermore, mental illness is a subject in need of much research to determine the extent to which it plays a part in school shootings.²⁶ Many school shooters have been identified as having mental and emotional distress.²⁷ However, rather than mental illness being the cause, it is quite possible that mental illness predisposes a person to multiple risk factors that increase the chance of violence. For example, people with mental disorders may have a higher risk of violence “because of their disordered perceptions, assumptions, attributional biases, and disordered processes of thinking and affect that accompany these diagnoses.”²⁸ Numerous studies have found a relationship between aggressive and violent behavior with hyperactivity, attention or concentration deficits, and impulsivity.²⁹ Impulsivity causes a person to consider the present rather than the future,³⁰ and therefore, may not allow them to fully comprehend the consequences of their actions. Additionally, narcissists may commit violence because of their belief in their superiority and their feelings of this superiority being threatened by others.³¹ It has been determined that many school shooters underwent counseling sessions for depression, impulsivity, and antisocial behavior.³² Rather than focusing on the specific mental illness of an

²⁵ Verlinden, *supra* note 1, at 46 [emphasis omitted].

²⁶ See Lindsey Lewis, *Mental Illness, Propensity for Violence, and the Gun Control Act*, 11 HOUS. J. HEALTH. L. & POL’Y 149, 150 (2011) (noting that “the relationship between mental illness and violence is complex and somewhat murky, and studies have generated diverse findings”).

²⁷ Jung Sung Hong et al., *supra* note 14, at 564.

²⁸ Verlinden, *supra* note 1, at 8

²⁹ Verlinden, *supra* note 1, at 7.

³⁰ *Id.*

³¹ *Id.* at 9–10.

³² Jung Sung Hong et al., *supra* note 14, at 564.

individual, it may be more beneficial to focus on their thinking and behaviors to assess if that person is likely to become violent.³³

Lastly, many studies found that the school shooters had easy access to guns.³⁴ Many school shooters had guns in their home and used those weapons in their attacks.³⁵ A study examining school shootings from 1992–1999 found that “students were more likely to have obtained firearms from their homes than from any other source.”³⁶ Additionally, the summary of the U.S. Secret Services’ Safe School Initiative Report also noted that in nearly two-thirds of the incidents studied, the school shooter obtained the gun(s) in their own home or in the home of a relative.³⁷

III. HOW TO BEST PREVENT SCHOOL SHOOTINGS

Although there is no way to ensure that school shootings will not occur, there are many policies and prevention-mechanisms a school can put in place to minimize the possibility that a gunman or gunmen will infiltrate the school and commit mass murder. To begin, all schools should implement *multiple* measures that best suit *that particular school*, in order to minimize the risk of a school shooting. In addition, all schools should have: (1) a school resource officer (or officers) to build relationships with students and respond to potential or actual violence when necessary and (2) a threat assessment procedure in place, which will assist in identifying students who may have the intent to commit violence upon the school. Furthermore, parents and relatives

³³ Verlinden, *supra* note 1, at 25–26 (noting that the threat assessment approach to school violence focuses on behaviors as a “pathway to violent action”).

³⁴ Verlinden, *supra* note 1, at 44; Preventing School Shootings, *supra* note 15, at 13; Source of Firearms used by Students in School-Associated Violent Deaths—United States, 1992-1999, 52 *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* 169, 170 (2003) [hereinafter *Source of Firearms Used by Students*].

³⁵ Verlinden, *supra* note 1, at 44.

³⁶ *Source of Firearms Used by Students*, *supra* note 34, at 170.

³⁷ Preventing School Shootings, *supra* note 15, at 13.

should take the necessary measures to prohibit student access to any weapons that are keep in their homes.

A very important measure that every school should put in place in order to promote student safety is to employ a school resource officer (“SRO”). Although SRO programs may slightly differ, Lavarello and Trump defined SROs as “certified peace officers employed by local or county law enforcement agencies and assigned to a particular school or schools.”³⁸ It is important that the SRO be thought of as a police officer and not as a school administrator.³⁹ SROs are usually armed in case of emergency and in uniform.⁴⁰ SRO’s have three main responsibilities.⁴¹ First, SROs are “police officers with arrest powers.”⁴² Second, SROs are “counselors of law related issue, helping guide children to appropriate community services.”⁴³ Third, SROs are “teachers of the law, either teaching their own classes or visiting classes to give talks and presentations.”⁴⁴ SROs are highly beneficial because in contrast to the average school administrator or teacher who typically has not received training related to an armed intruder being in the school, SROs possess specific training concerning how to respond to possible or actual threats in the school.⁴⁵ Data has shown that the implementation of SROs reduces crime in schools and makes students feel safer.⁴⁶

Another highly beneficial aspect of SROs is that the constant contact with students “normalizes interactions between students and police officers, improves communication, and

³⁸ Curtis Lavarello & Kenneth S. Trump, *To Arm or Not to Arm*, AMERICAN SCHOOL BOARD JOURNAL, March 2001, at 32.

³⁹ Spencer C. Weiler & Martha Cray, *Police at School: A Brief History and Current Status of School Resource Officers*, 84 THE CLEARING HOUSE 160, 160 (2011).

⁴⁰ Matthew T. Theriot, *School Resource Officers and the Criminalization of Student Behavior*, 37 J. CRIM. JUSTICE 280, 280 (2009).

⁴¹ Weiler, *supra* note 39, at 160.

⁴² *Id.*

⁴³ *Id.*

⁴⁴ *Id.*

⁴⁵ *Id.*

⁴⁶ Richard K. James et al., *Including School Resource Officers in School-Based Crisis Intervention: Strengthening Student Support*, 32 SCH. PSYCH. INT’L 210, 215 (2011).

builds trust.”⁴⁷ SROs must be interested in working with students, have empathy for students with emotional disturbances and mental illness, have significant interpersonal skills, and be excellent at building rapport and relationships.⁴⁸ Building a relationship with students will make those who may not feel comfortable coming forward with information regarding a possible dangerous situation more likely to approach the SROs.⁴⁹ It is imperative that students and teachers alike exert an increased willingness to come forward with information regarding possible threats or dangers posed to the school. As discussed above, in nearly three-fourths of cases examined by the U.S. Secret Service in the Safe School Initiative, the school shooter told another individual of his plans before he carried them out, but rarely did anyone alert school authorities or police to the information.⁵⁰ Promoting positive relationships between students and teachers is necessary to enable students to report potential threats or danger, and this reporting “is one of the most effective school safety strategies.”⁵¹ In addition to students feeling wary about reporting their peers, it appears that there is a “culture of silence” among teachers and administrators regarding bullying,⁵² which is often a catalyst to these tragic events. Educator Cassie Bell suggests that there must be a “renewed collegiality and collaboration” between school administrators and teachers “which would in turn [] greatly help to mitigate the power differential and enable leadership to be built throughout the school.”⁵³

Another way to make schools safer is to address the issue of mental health and well-being of students. While SROs are a step in the right direction towards assisting students with mental

⁴⁷ *Id.*

⁴⁸ *Id.*

⁴⁹ *Id.*; see Preventing School Shootings, *supra* note 15, at 12 (explaining that “it is important to decrease barriers that may prevent students who have information from coming forward”).

⁵⁰ Preventing School Shootings, *supra* note 15, at 12.

⁵¹ Katherine Cowan & Cathy Paine, *School Safety: What Really Works*, Principal Leadership, March 2013, at 14.

⁵² See generally Cassie Bell, *Breaking the Silence: How Speaking the Truth to Power Can Change Teaching and Learning*, OUR SCHOOLS/OUR SELVES 105 (2013) (examining a school board in Ontario, Canada and finding a detrimental “culture of silence”).

⁵³ *Id.* at 116.

health issues, threat assessments are necessary to ensure the safety of our schools. Threat assessments allow school authorities to “identify, assess, and manage students who may have the intent and capacity to launch an attack...”⁵⁴ The threat assessment strategy explained by author Rhonda Barton is one that could be used as a template for other school districts,⁵⁵ which can be modified to fit a specific schools needs. Under this specific type of threat assessment strategy, a Level I screening is triggered if there is a violent incident or a threat of a violent incident.⁵⁶ This Level I screening brings together an administrator, counsel, SRO, and someone such as a teacher or special education case manager who knows the student, as well as a parent.⁵⁷ Together, they document concerns, assess management strategies, and determine whether a Level II assessment is necessary.⁵⁸ If they find that a Level II assessment is necessary, representatives from the school district or education service district, along with mental health agencies and law enforcement, take the necessary steps to eliminate the threat, which is determined on a case-by-case basis.⁵⁹ Keeping kids in school in order to monitor their behavior is what differentiates a threat assessment program from a zero-tolerance policy.⁶⁰ Zero-tolerance policies are not nearly as effective because they do not look at the situation on a case-by-case basis, and therefore, do not address the root of the problem, but rather suspend or expel students,⁶¹ which in-turn can foster anger in a student and make a threat to the school more imminent.

⁵⁴ *Threat Assessment in Schools: A Guide to Managing Threatening Situations and to Creating Safe School Climates*, United States Secret Service & United States Department of Education, May 2002, at iii.

⁵⁵ Rhonda Barton, *Keeping Schools Safe Through Threat Assessment*, THE EDUC. DIGEST, September 2008, at 21.

⁵⁶ *Id.*

⁵⁷ *Id.*

⁵⁸ *Id.*

⁵⁹ *Id.*

⁶⁰ *Id.* at 22.

⁶¹ See Brandi Melvin, *Zero Tolerance Policies and Terroristic Threatening in Schools*, 40 J.L. & EDUC. 719, 719 (explaining that zero tolerance policies often invoke harsher punishments for the specific offense than are necessary, categorizing students as criminals for minor infractions”).

“Leakage,” as referred to by the FBI⁶² should most definitely be taken into consideration when deciding whether to conduct a threat assessment. “Leakage,” according to the FBI, refers to indicia of violence, including letters, essays, poems, stories, song lyrics, or drawings, which may foreshadow violent acts.⁶³ The FBI reported that since Columbine, response to leakage has assisted in foiling many school shootings.⁶⁴ Although punishing students for “leakage” may have First Amendment implications, the student will not be able to sustain his First Amendment claim if the school board can show that:

“(1) the student speech constituted a “true threat”; or (2) by engaging in threatening or disruptive speech, the student substantially or materially interfered with the workings of the school; or that (3) the student speech impinged upon the rights of other students to be secured and let alone; and that (4) where practicable the school board adhered to procedural guidelines prior to suspending or expelling the student, or documenting his or her permanent record.”⁶⁵

In addition to SROs and threat assessments, limiting students’ access to guns is necessary to best prevent school violence. While the prior suggestions are primarily the schools responsibility, securing weapons in the home is the responsibility of parents and relatives. As discussed above, in nearly two-thirds of the incidents studied in the Safe School Initiative Report, students obtained their gun(s) or weapons of choice from the homes of parents or relatives.⁶⁶ Additionally, parents with high-school aged children are less likely to store firearms safely when compared with parents of younger children, “despite the fact that older children are at a greater risk for firearm death.”⁶⁷ While pediatric health-care providers should reiterate to

⁶² Richard Blystone, *School Speech v. School Safety: In the Aftermath of Violence on School Campuses Throughout This Nation, How Should School Officials Respond to Threatening Student Expression*, 2007 BYU EDUC. & L.J. 199, 201 (2007).

⁶³ *Id.*

⁶⁴ *Id.*

⁶⁵ *Id.* at 201–202.

⁶⁶ Preventing School Shootings, *supra* note 15, at 13

⁶⁷ Source of Firearms Used by Students, *supra* note 34, at 171.

parents the importance of securely storing any weapons they may have in the home,⁶⁸ it is the parents' ultimate responsibility to make sure their kids do not have, in any way, access to their weapons. Parents should keep all weapons in a locked firearm safe or a portable locked handgun box.⁶⁹ Also, parents should talk to friends and relatives who own weapons that the child might have access to, and ask them to do the same.⁷⁰ Eliminating the possibility that a child will have access to guns or other weapons can foil the students' plans to carry out an attack on the school.⁷¹

IV. CONCLUSION

School shootings are an ever-increasing statistic in today's society. A single school shooting can amount to many, many deaths and unimaginable pain for the families and friends of those affected. While this problem is growing and many factors play into why a student would commit such an act of violence, this paper demonstrates some necessary steps that schools and parents alike must take in order to best protect students, teachers, and faculty members alike. Schools' implementation of an SRO and threat assessment program, in addition to parents and relatives taking steps to secure any weapons they may own, will allow us the ability to prevent school shootings to a greater extent than we can presently. It is also important to remember that each school district is unique, and faces distinct challenges, and school administrators should enact the measures that work best for that specific school.

⁶⁸ *Id.* at 170.

⁶⁹ *Id.*

⁷⁰ *Id.*

⁷¹ See Preventing School Shootings, *supra* note 15, at 14 (explaining that “when the idea of an attack exists, any effort to acquire prepare, or use a weapon may signal an attacker’s progression from idea to action”).