

About School Shootings*

Once again, a mass shooting at a school. Once again, the country mourns and expresses condolences. Once again, everyone asks why these horrific incidents happen and what to do about them.

As with other problems confronting schools, violence using guns is a major societal (and political) problem. Schools can't solve the problem alone, but they must play a significant role in addressing the problem and its impact.

Here's what that means.

(1) Prevention

- (A) *Going Beyond Security Measures.* Schools must implement prevention efforts that go beyond enhancing security. Schools can do more to help young people develop into healthy, nonviolent, and positive contributors to society. In particular, schools can increase efforts to promote positive social and emotional development and address threats to such development that foster psychological reactance. There is a movement for a greater focus on social and emotional learning. But too little attention is being paid to reducing factors that undermine positive mental health. Schools need to examine the way vulnerable students are inappropriately treated each day at school in classrooms and school-wide by staff and peers. And then they must act to turn the situation around.
- (B) *Providing Special Supports as Soon as a Problem Appears.* Schools have a range of student and learning supports. However, these supports are not well designed and developed to respond quickly and effectively in situations where there are many students who teachers readily identify as beginning to manifest behavior, learning, and emotional problems.
- (C) *Ensuring that Students with Severe and Chronic Problems are Connected with Effective Help.* Few schools can provide intensive help, so they need to develop strong connections with community resources to facilitate appropriate referrals and follow-through.

(2) Aftermath Interventions for Students and Staff in all schools. See the following resources:

>Talking to kids about the shooting

http://www.nctsn.org/sites/default/files/assets/pdfs/talking_to_children_about_the_shooting.pdf

>Talking to kids about tragedies (such as shootings and terror attacks) in the news

<https://www.schoolcrisiscenter.org/resources/talking-kids-about-tragedies/>

>Talking to kids about school shootings (from the American Psychology Assoc.)

http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/crisis_qt/APAshooting.pdf

In our Center's Resource Aid Packet on

>Responding to Crises at a School

<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/crisis/crisis.pdf>

see

>>Crisis Response Checklist

>>Psychological First Aid

>>Major Facets of Crisis Response

>>Responding to a Crisis: A Few General Principles

>>The School's Role in Addressing Psychological Reactions to Loss

>>Planning and Action for the MH Needs of Students and School Staff after a Major Disaster

From more, go to

>the Center's homepage (<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu>) and click on the icon

Responding to a Crisis

>the Quick Find on *Crisis Prevention and Response* –

http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/p2107_01.htm

And here's some facets of school shootings to ponder:

The following are excerpts from a Feb 15th article by two psychiatrists; online at <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/slightly-blightly/201802/clues-the-mind-florida-school-shooter>

Eric Madfis, an Associate Professor of Criminal Justice at the University of Washington, Tacoma, argues that there's a tendency for the mass media to portray school shootings as pointless, random and motiveless tragedies when they are not.

Instead, [he] argues in his investigation entitled, "In Search of Meaning: Are School Rampage Shootings Random and Senseless Violence?" that clear patterns emerge.¹ ...

Eric Madfis dismisses the popular depiction of mass shootings as the result of someone out of the blue "snapping" and committing violence on a spur-of-the-moment.

Extensive planning indicates that rampage attacks serve purposes. These also fall into clear repeated patterns, including vengeance, infamy seeking, a need for a sense of macho power, often with a background of long-term internal discord and interpersonal defeats. ...

... a team of academics from Northwestern University, led by Adam Robert Pah and Luis Amaral conclude that increasing uncertainty in the school-to-work transition contributes to school shootings.² ...

While the majority of American school gun violence generally occurs in urban areas, rampage school shootings are much more likely to occur at suburban and rural schools in less populated, less diverse communities, located in more socially and politically conservative neighborhoods. ...

The humiliating closeness and pressure to conform in small towns might therefore be implicated, particularly as attacks tend to take place where the school staff and student body are intolerant of differences, when issues of bullying and marginalization are not addressed by the school culture.

Another possible emerging pattern is an educational environment of punitive zero tolerance which might discourage students from confiding in trusted adults when they hear crucial information about impending threats of violence. ...

That there is something about school culture which needs addressing is further hinted at by a study entitled, "Alone and adrift: The association between mass school shootings, school size, and student support", investigating twenty-two mass school shooting incidents between January 1995 and June 2014.³ ...

The authors, psychologists Abigail Baird, Emma Roellke and Debra Zeifman from Vassar College conclude that transitioning from a smaller, more supportive school to a larger, more anonymous school may exacerbate pre-existing psychological difficulties among potential school shooters.

Eric Madfis argues that the huge media attention school rampage attacks inevitably attract, distorts public perception over the true likelihood of these events. For example, he quotes statistics that compared to their homes and the streets, in the USA, schools remain the safest places for young people. ...

¹ Madfis, E. (2017). In search of meaning: Are school rampage shootings random and senseless violence? *The Journal of Psychology*, 151, 21-35. DOI: 10.1080/00223980.2016.1196161

² Pah, A. R., Hagan, J., Jennings, A. L., Jain, A., Albrecht, K., Hockenberry, A. J., & Amaral, L. A. N. (2017). Economic insecurity and the rise in gun violence at US schools. *Nature Human Behaviour*, 1. DOI: 10.1038/s41562-016-0040

³ Baird, A.A., Roellke, E.V., & Zeifman, D.M. (2017). Alone and adrift: The association between mass school shootings, school size, and student support. *The Social Science Journal*, 54, 261-270.

Relatedly, here's an excerpt from an early report from the American Psychological Association's Commission on Violence and Youth that sought to focus attention on what is and what needs to be done related to anti-violence interventions.

The urgent need to prevent further destruction of young lives by violence has led to a proliferation of anti-violence interventions for children, youth, and their families. Many of these interventions were created primarily for service delivery, without scientific underpinnings or plans for outcome evaluation. Some are targeted at perpetrators of violence, others at their victims, and still others at bystanders who may play a pivotal role in condoning or preventing violence. Some are preventive, and others seek to ameliorate the damage already done. Some are targeted toward changing individuals, and others seek to change the systems and settings that influence behavior, such as the family, peers, schools, and community. Those programs that have been evaluated and show promise include interventions aimed at reducing risk factors or at strengthening families and children to help them resist the effects of detrimental life circumstances.... Effective intervention programs share two primary characteristics: (a) they draw on the understanding of developmental and sociocultural risk factors leading to antisocial behavior, - and (b) they use theory-based intervention strategies with known efficacy in changing behavior, tested program designs, and validated, objective measurement techniques to assess outcomes. Other key criteria that describe the most promising intervention approaches include: They begin as early as possible to interrupt the "trajectory toward violence." Evidence indicates that intervention early in childhood can reduce aggressive and antisocial behavior and can also affect certain risk factors associated with antisocial behavior, such as low educational achievement and inconsistent parenting practices....

Finally, a Note of Caution

Not Another Ad Hoc Set of School Interventions

It is unlikely that a safe and nurturing learning environment will emerge simply by developing a better violence prevention program. Such programs can help, but ultimately what a school needs is a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system for addressing barriers to development and learning and re-engaging disconnected students. The time has come for schools to move away from stand-alone programs for addressing problems such as violence, bullying, substance abuse, and so forth. Just adding another program worsens the marginalized, fragmented, and piecemeal status of student and learning supports.

Rather than pursuing yet another discrete program, it is essential to use each concern that rises to a high policy level as an opportunity to catalyze and leverage systemic change. The aim should be to take another step toward transforming how schools go about ensuring that all students are safe, develop fully, and have an equal opportunity to succeed at school and beyond. It is time to embed advocacy for discrete programs into advocacy for unifying and developing a comprehensive and equitable system. Addressing barriers to learning and teaching and re-engaging disconnected students is a school improvement imperative. Developing and implementing a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student and learning supports is the next evolutionary stage in meeting this imperative.

(For more on this, see
>*Violence Prevention and Safe Schools* –
<http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/violence/violence.pdf>)

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