

A Closer Look at the Early Detection and Prevention of School Shootings

Shelley-Ann Hincks

Southern Oregon University

Abstract

In response to the latest school shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School, in which 20 children and six adults lost their lives, President Obama talked about a new gun law and attempted to place a ban on assault rifles (1). News stations reported on sheriff's departments around the nation reacting to this by saying that they would not implement this law, should it get passed. In a report on gun laws in the US, Wals , concludes that, "America has the highest gun homicide rate of all developed countries", and that "Americans own 35 percent to 50 percent of the world's civilian guns" (2) Wals, also states that, "America's gun laws are the most lax in the developed world with no federal regulations banning the semiautomatic assault weapons or large-capacity ammo magazines often used in mass shootings" (2) This paper examines what the school system can do to protect itself from the lethal combination of an angry young person armed with deadly weapons and proposes a critical look at the access that children have to weapons in their homes.

A Critical look at the Early Detection and Prevention of School Shootings.

The American Department of Education needs to empower itself with solid and applicable solutions designed with the main focus of preventing school shootings. Teachers and administration staff are trained to handle school violence: a comprehensive meta-analysis of anger management and other impulse control programs (3), implemented in schools across America confirms that something is being done toward the handling of inappropriate behavior in schools. The issue is that although there are systems available to deal with mental instability or excessive and aggressive behavior in schools, a fresh and substantial analysis is needed as to whether these systems and programs are effective in the early detection and subsequent prevention of school shootings.

As stated by Candelaria, et. al (3), a number of systems and programs are at present being implemented and utilized by many of the schools in America, but most are geared toward at-risk students and their efforts focus on the prevention of violent behavior. A feasible concept when considering that a school's primary responsibility for the management of student behavior is from the point that the student is on the school's premises or on their way to and from school. As a result, the school and its staff are placed in the position of dealing with "whoever walks through the door" (3).

All schools have school safety policies, and codes of conduct. Reece, suggests that many of these codes of conduct are antique documents. This means that "some have never been clearly conceptualized, because although "*new problem behaviors*" have emerged in students, like "*hooded jackets and cell phones*", these have simply been added to a laundry list of banned behaviors" (4). Reece further suggests that, "a fresh look at school disciplines regarding suspension and expulsion would bring this section of school management into the modern day era, and that school discipline systems should be overhauled [because] in the past, suspension was most likely an effective solution, but, today alternative methods might

have a greater impact on changing inappropriate student behavior, saying that traditional actions have focused on “*exclusionary*” consequences for wayward students such as suspension and expulsion” (4).

When evaluating what school principals, teachers and administration staff may need in regard to protecting schools from violence, the law should take into consideration how the staffs of a school are going to be able to define a potential shooter out of the numerous children they manage daily. It is certainly fair to expect them to monitor aggressive behavior, even the violent acts of one child upon another. It may be asking too much, however, to expect them to have the skills or qualifications to detect or predict by means of studying behavior what a student might do in the future. A cautionary look is suggested toward complimentary systems that could network or interlace with systems existing. Systems, which at present are not, nor will be in the immediate future, adequately prepared for this particular kind of violence.

In order to build on the existing systems, a more refined look at them might be appropriate before making any decisions for change or enhancement. Presently, school staff functions under license of the mandatory training on how to cope with victims of bullying and other incidents that can happen in a school day. The public should consider whether the answer is to allow schools to become barricaded secure facilities by integrating iris and face recognition devices, and having armed guards at entrance doors or worse, armed teachers.

It is necessary here to mention that bullying in schools has long been associated with school shootings, and is widely believed to be the precursor to many of these events. In an evaluation of State Bullying Laws and Policies by Stuart-Cassel, a document that was presented to the US Department of Education in 2011, states that “The Columbine High School shooting in 1999, was the first of many incidents that seemed to implicate bullying as an underlying cause to school shootings”. Declaring that, “bullying is being viewed as an

urgent, social, health and education concern,” and that “officials and members of the school systems are presently looking at bullying as a very serious issue” (as referenced in Green & Ross, 2005, p. ix). Stuart-Cassel continued by reporting that bullying is under-managed by society - not studied to the depth that it should be - and all too often leads to real trauma for the victims (5). Bullying destroys the popular assumption that school is a safe and positive learning environment, and rather creates an environment of fear that can very quickly reach uncontrollable levels.

Facts that support these issues of bullying in school environments come from a paper written by Marisa, Vossekuil, Fein, & Modzeleski and are posted by the US Department of Justice/Office of Justice Programs: Fast Facts about Bullying are (6):

1. In an OJJDP survey, 13.2 percent of participants reported having been physically bullied during the previous year.
2. In the US, 13 percent of 6th-through 10th grade student’s bully, and 6 percent are both victims and bullies.
3. In a survey of American middle and high school students, 66 percent of bullying victims believed school professionals responded poorly to bullying problems.
4. Bullying takes place more often at school than on the way to and from school.

Bullying is highlighted here as most shooters have been bullied at school in some form. A review of the above noted points 3 and 4 allows us the opportunity to see a pattern evolve. First the child is bullied, and then school professionals handle the incident poorly. This may be the first area of existing protocols that can be uplifted in the form of refresher training courses geared toward the management of bullying in schools.

At present, it would seem that schools have no remedy for the particular mix of violence involved in a school shooting. There is no possible way for schools and their staff to protect

themselves from something that they have no control over: they are unable to secure weapons in these children's homes. They are also unable to control the home environment and how the children are influenced to deal with problems in their lives. Given the facts in an article written by Kaylen, on the association of youth violence and social disorganization (p.1), and another by Jaffe, Karriker, Foshee, & Ennett, which discusses, "understanding how neighborhoods influence the development of youth violence" (7,8). These two papers support the concept that schools essentially come in at the tail end of the problems that start at home. Therefore leaving schools to defend their selves against enraged teenagers that have easy access to deadly weapons who then decide to walk through the door.

Research addressing school shootings and threats of school shootings by adolescents has emerged out of necessity to address the issue. According to Booth, "there is evidence that many school shooters in past cases have displayed odd or aggressive behavior, long before the actual event took place," such as, "many of them publicly announcing their threats in the form of verbal communication and email[s] to their friends"(9). Booth also mentions that, "obvious warning signals were prevalent", which then begs the question of why something was not done to prevent them, (9).

In hindsight, these "apparently obvious warning signals" still does not enable anyone to compile a profile of how a potential shooter will behave (9). These crimes are complex in nature and intertwined with many other factors such a socio-economic environment, social bonds, family dynamics, peer relationships and opinion of self. Ching offers "a new phenomenon called appetitive violence, related to youth committing violence for thrill seeking" (10). Also, in a study by National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime (NCAVC, 1999), an important fact was highlighted: that fact being the encouragement of students to come forward with information about "*Leakage*" - a term O'Toole uses for, "when a student intentionally or unintentionally reveals clues of feelings, thoughts, fantasies,

attitudes, or intentions that may signal an impending violent act” (11). This confirms that this is a multi-faceted problem with many different areas that deserve more study. This author believes that a bird’s eye view of how shooters have behaved in the past will go a long way to inform and educate on behavioral signals that could be interpreted early, and used in the prevention of violence of this nature.

A few of these behaviors are studied by O’Tool and reported in the document (NCAVC threat assessment-intervention model report), suggesting that the “one response to the pressure for action may be an effort to identify the next shooter by developing a “profile” of the typical shooter”, which “may sound like a reasonable preventative measure” but reasons that “trying to draw up a catalogue or *checklist* of warning signs to detect a potential school shooter can be shortsighted, and even dangerous” (11). Proposing rather that a “Four Pronged Assessment Model” be utilized, based on the “totality of the circumstances”, known about the student in four major areas such as: the personality of the student, the family and school dynamics, the student’s role in these, and lastly the student’s social dynamics (11).

The complexity of these crimes features many different arenas that require further study into the psychology of school shooters. The subject that will be addressed and needs to be highlighted is the access that these children have to some of the most lethal weapons in the world; the argument being that without the weapons these crimes cannot take place.

A paper by Burke, about juvenile culpability and brain formation of youth, which discusses the development of brain function and teenage cognitive capabilities, and citing Feld, notes that “Teenagers make poorer decisions than adults because of basic psychological, neurobiological, physical, and developmental differences” (12). Burke (2011) also takes a closer look at, “the reasons youth are not allowed to assume adult responsibilities, such as entering into contracts, purchasing alcohol, getting married without a parent’s consent, and voting is because of their poor decision making” (12). An addition can be made to this list:

purchasing a gun, as teenagers are not legally allowed to purchase guns for the very same reasons. This thought should begin serious consideration regarding the dangers of teenagers having easy access to guns in their homes.

Vossekuil, Reddy, Borum, & Modzeleski in a paper on “The Final Report and findings of the Safe School Initiative”, offers some insight into some of the facts about a few of the shootings that have taken place at schools in recent years (13,14):

- The shooters had access to guns, (either from their own home or that of a relative).
- Most shooters did behave in a manner that had caused concern indicating a child in trouble, some even to the point of being expelled from the schools that they attacked.
- Shooters have told at least one person if not many, of their intentions.
- All of the attacks are planned in advance with specific targets in mind, and are not impulsive (p.11-12).

The suggestions of solutions mentioned so far are applicable; having said that, they only highlight the argument. Although they could play a very important role in managing violence in schools, they may not or cannot offer the system a way to stop children from gaining access to lethal weapons. It is not the Education Department’s (ED) place to usurp the 2nd Amendment (The Right to Bear Arms). The true answer might be to look at what safety measures are exercised in the homes of teens that have access to these weapons. The ED needs to first establish the right to the intimate knowledge of a troubled student if the need arises to warrant. It then needs to take heed of the words of President Obama, quoted in a Press Release (2013) by Secretary Duncan, US Secretary of Education, “We can limit access to the deadliest guns and ammunition, and we can put in checks to keep guns out of the wrong hands. We can also provide new resources to schools so that they can develop and implement

comprehensive emergency management plans” (1). These words are words of hope and an indication that the world is taking notice.

In conclusion, and in offering a solid and applicable solution toward the prevention of even one more school shooting, a more intense analysis of behavior displayed by school shooters in the past, and prior to the shooting incident is needed. Moreover, a critical evaluation of what the education system is presently lacking in resources of how to identify what sort of weapons teens have access to in their homes, or relative’s homes. A notable assessment of how parents can be more accountable for the weapons kept in their houses. Some parents may not agree with this, but need to discern between the loss of privacy against the cost, which is the life of a child and often times many children. Harsher penalties could be legislated and put into place regarding the security of weapons kept in the home. Awareness campaigns can inform parents of the severe consequences that may be faced in the event of one of their children being associated with any incident involving a weapon on school grounds.

References

1. Secretary Duncan (US Secretary of Education) in a statement on the President's recommendations on reducing gun violence in schools. *Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, and Other Related Agencies Press Release*, (April 2013; <http://www.ed.gov/news/speeches/statement-us-secretary-education-arne-duncanfy-2014-budget-request>)
2. B. Wals, Arms race time. *Vocational and Career Collections*. **181(1)**, 14-15. (February 2013).
3. A. Candelaria, A. Fedewa, S. Ahn, The effects of anger management on children's social and emotional outcomes: A meta-analysis. *School Psychology International*. **33.6**, 596-614 (2012). DOI: 10.117/0143034312454360.
4. L. P. Reece, Ph.D., What every administrator needs to know about alternatives to suspension and expulsion. (*Univ. of Nebraska* http://www.mslbd.org/Admin_Conference/Peterson%2010-6-06.pdf)
5. V. Stuart-Cassel, A. Bell, J. F. Springer, Analysis of state bullying laws and policies. (*Dept. of Education* <http://www2.ed.gov/rschstat/eval/bullying/state-bullying-laws/state-bullying-laws.pdf>)
6. R. Marisa *et al.*, Evaluating risk for targeted violence in schools: comparing risk assessment, threat assessment, and other approaches. *Psychology in the Schools*, **38(2)**, (February 2001). DOI: 10.1002/pits.1007
7. K. J. Karriker-Jaffe, Ph.D., V. A. Foshee, Ph.D., S. T. Ennett, Ph.D., Examining how neighborhood disadvantage influences trajectories of adolescent violence: A look at social bonding and psychological distress. *Journal of School Health*. **81(12)**, 764-773 (November 2011). DOI: 10.1111/j.1746-1561.2011.00656.x
8. M. T. Kaylen, W. A. Pridemore, A reassessment of the association between social

- disorganization and youth violence in rural Areas. *Social Science Quarterly*. **92(4)**, 978-1001. (October 2011). DOI: 10.1111/j.1540-6237.2011.00808.x
9. B. Booth, Ph.D., V. B. Van Hasselt, Ph.D., G. M. Vecchi, Ph.D., Addressing school violence. *U.S. Secret Service*. (2002)
10. H. Ching, M. Daffern, S. Thomas, Appetitive violence: A new phenomenon?. *Psychiatry, Psychology & Law*. **(19)5**, 745-763 (November 2011). DOI: 10.1080/13218719.2011.623338
11. M. E. O'Tool, Ph.D., The school shooter: a threat assessment perspective. (*FBI Academy, Quantico, Va. 1999*; <http://www.fbi.gov/stats-services/publications/school-shooter>)
12. S. A. Burke, Department of criminology and criminal justice, southern oregon university. Under Construction: Brian Formation, culpability, and the criminal justice system. Elsevier Ltd. International. *Journal of Law and Psychiatry*. **34**, 381-385.
13. B. Vossekuil *et al.*, An interim report on the prevention of targeted violence in school. *Washington, DC; U.S. Secret Service, National Threat Assessment Center* (2000).
14. B. Vossekuil *et al.*, The final report of the safe school initiative. *U.S. Secret Service and U.S. Dept. of Educ.* (1990).