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TOPICS IN THIS ISSUE

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07.21 SAFETY AND SECURITY

School violence: threat assessment, part II

This is the second installment of excerpts from three national reports on school shootings and threat assessment:

[1] "The School Shooter: A Threat Assessment Perspective" (National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime, Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2000) ("FBI").

   http://www.fbi.gov/publications/school/school2.pdf

[2] "The Final Report and Findings of the Safe Schools Initiative" (Secret Service and Department of Education, 2002) ("Secret Service").

   http://www.secretservice.gov/ntac/ssi_final_report.pdf

[3] "Threat Assessment in Schools: A Guide to Managing Threatening Situations and to

Creating Safe School Climates" (Secret Service and Department of Education, 2002) ("Guide").

http://www.secretservice.gov/ntac/ssi_guide.pdf

The focus in this issue is on reports two and three, identified as "Secret Service" and "Guide." Our excerpts are designed to alert readers to key themes in both reports. We strongly recommend reviewing the reports in their entirety. At the end of this series we will publish a suggested "letter to the faculty" on teaching troubled students.

Excerpts follow from Safe Schools Initiative (Secret Service) and Guide in *LPR* question and answer format:

What did the researchers study?

The Safe School Initiative identified 37 incidents involving 41 attackers that met the study definition of targeted school violence and occurred between 1974 and the end of the 2000 school year. These incidents took place in 26 states, with more than one incident occurring in Arkansas, California, Kentucky, Missouri and Tennessee (p. 15) (Secret Service).

How common was school violence?

The Department of Education reports that nearly 60 million children attend the nation's 119,000+ schools. The combined efforts of the Secret Service and the Department of Education identified 37 incidents of targeted school-based attacks, committed by 41 individuals over a 25-year period (p. 7) (Secret Service).

[T]he odds that a child would die in school–-by homicide or suicide-–are. . no greater than 1 in 1 million. In 1998, students in grades 9-12 were the victims of 1.6 million thefts and 1.2 million nonfatal violent crimes, while in this same period 60 school-associated violent deaths were reported for this student population (p. 6) (Secret Service).

What are the key findings?

[The] 10 key findings of the Safe School Initiative are as follows:

• Incidents of targeted violence at school rarely were sudden, impulsive acts.

• Prior to most incidents, other people knew about the attacker's idea and/or plan to attack.

• Most attackers did not threaten their targets directly prior to advancing the attack.

• There is no accurate or useful "profile" of students who engaged in targeted school violence.

 • Most attackers engaged in some behavior prior to the incident that caused others concern or indicated a need for help.

 • Most attackers had difficulty coping with significant losses or personal failures. Moreover, many had considered or attempted suicide.

• Many attackers felt bullied, persecuted or injured by others prior to the attack.

• Most attackers had access to and had used weapons prior to the attack.

• In many cases, other students were involved in some capacity.

• Despite prompt law enforcement responses, most shooting incidents were stopped by means other than law enforcement intervention (p. 11) (Secret Service).

What were attacker characteristics?

There is no accurate or useful "profile" of students who engaged in targeted school violence.

Although all of the attackers in this study were boys, there is no set of traits that described all–or even most–of the attackers. Instead, they varied considerably in demographic, background and other characteristics.

• The attackers ranged in age from 11 to 21, with most attackers between the ages of 13 and 18 at the time of the attack (85 percent, n=35).

• Three-quarters of the attackers were white (76 percent, n=31). One-quarter of the attackers came from other racial and ethnic backgrounds, including African American (12 percent, n=5), Hispanic (5 percent, n=2), Native Alaskan (2 percent, n=1), Native American (2 percent, n=1), and Asian (2 percent, n=1).

•The attackers came from a variety of family situations, ranging from intact families with numerous ties to the community, to foster homes with histories of neglect.

• Almost two-thirds of the attackers came from two-parent families (63 percent, n=26), living either with both biological parents (44 percent, n=18) or with one biological parent and one stepparent (19 percent, n=8).

• Some lived with one biological parent (19 percent, n=8) or split time between two biological parents (2 percent, n=1).

• Very few lived with a foster parent or legal guardian (5 percent, n=2) (p. 19) (Secret Service).

In the climate of fear that followed recent attacks, students in high schools across the country who appeared angry and wore trench coats were marked as possible school attackers. They were so labeled because of appearance and demeanor. Blanket characterizations, or student 'profiles,' do not provide a reliable basis for making judgments of the threat posed by a particular student. Even worse, the use of profiles can shift attention away from more reliable facts and evidence about a student's behavior and communications (p. 32) (Guide).

Did attackers tend to be loners?

Attackers also varied in the types of social relationships they had established, ranging from socially isolated to popular among their peers.

• The largest group of attackers for whom this information was available appeared to socialize with mainstream students or were considered mainstream students themselves (41 percent, n=17).

• One-quarter of the attackers (27 percent, n=11) socialized with fellow students who were disliked by most mainstream students or were considered to be part of a "fringe" group.

• Few attackers had no close friends (12 percent, n=5).

• One-third of attackers had been characterized by others as "loners," or felt themselves to be loners (34 percent, n=14).

• However, nearly half of the attackers were involved in some organized social activities in or outside of school (44 percent, n=18). These activities included sports teams, school clubs, extracurricular activities and mainstream religious groups (p. 20) (Secret Service).

Were there patterns of behavioral or academic problems?

Attackers' histories of disciplinary problems at school also varied. Some attackers had no observed behavioral problems, while others had multiple behaviors warranting reprimand and/or discipline.

• Nearly two-thirds of the attackers had never been in trouble or rarely were in trouble at school (63 percent, n=26).

• One-quarter of the attackers had ever been suspended from school (27 percent, n=11).

• Only a few attackers had ever been expelled from school (10 percent, n=4). Most attackers showed no marked change in academic performance (56 percent, n=23), friendship patterns (73 percent, n=30), interest in school (59 percent, n=24), or school disciplinary problems (68 percent, n=28) prior to their attack (p. 20) (Secret Service).

Most attackers had no history of prior violent or criminal behavior . . .

• Fewer than one-third of the attackers were known to have acted violently toward others at some point prior to the incident (31 percent, n=13).

• Very few of the attackers were known to have harmed or killed an animal at any time prior to the incident (12 percent, n=5).

• Approximately one-quarter of the attackers had a prior history of arrest (27 percent, n=11) (p. 22) (Secret Service).

Were the attackers victims of bullying?

Almost three-quarters of the attackers felt persecuted, bullied, threatened, attacked or injured by others prior to the incident (71percent, n=29) (p. 21) (Secret Service).

Was there a pattern of mental illness?

A history of having been the subject of a mental health evaluation, diagnosed with a mental disorder, or involved in substance abuse did not appear to be prevalent among attackers. However, most attackers showed some history of suicidal attempts or thoughts, or a history of feeling extreme depression or desperation (p. 21) (Secret Service).

Were there any common precipitating events?

Most attackers appeared to have difficulty coping with losses, personal failures or other difficult circumstances. Almost all of the attackers had experienced or perceived some major loss prior to the attack (98 percent, n=40). These losses included a perceived failure or loss of status (66 percent, n=27); loss of a loved one or of a significant relationship, including a romantic relationship (51 percent, n=21); and a major illness experienced by the attacker or someone significant to him (15 percent, n=6) (p.23) (Secret Service).

Were most attacks planned in advance?

[T]he school-based attacks studied were rarely impulsive. Rather, these attacks typically were thought out beforehand and involved some degree of advance planning. In many cases, the attacker's observable behavior prior to the attack suggested he might be planning or preparing for a school attack. In nearly all of the incidents for which information concerning the attacker's conceptualization of the attack was available, researchers found that the attacker had developed his idea to harm the target(s) before the attack (95 percent, n=39) . . . Revenge was a motive for more than half of the attackers (61 percent, n=25) . . . Many attackers told other people about these grievances prior to their attacks (66 percent, n=27) (P.22-24) (Secret Service).

In most cases, other people knew about the attack before it took place. In over three-quarters of the incidents, at least one person had information that the attacker was thinking about or planning the school attack (81 percent, n=30). In nearly two-thirds of the incidents, more than one person had information about the attack before it occurred (59 percent, n=22). In nearly all of these cases, the person who knew was a peer–a friend, schoolmate, or sibling (93 percent, n=28/30). Some peers knew exactly what the attacker planned to do; others knew something "big" or "bad" was going to happen, and in several cases knew the time and date it was to occur. An adult had information about the idea or plan in only two cases (p.25) (Secret Service).

Once begun, how were the attacks stopped?

Despite prompt law enforcement responses, most attacks were stopped by means other than law enforcement intervention . . . Most school-based attacks were stopped through intervention by school administrators, educators and students-or by the attacker stopping on his own. In about one-third of the incidents, the attacker was apprehended by or surrendered to administrators, faculty, or school staff (27 percent, n=10) or to students (5 percent, n=2) (p.27) (Secret Service).

Which school cultures reduce the risk of violence?

A safe school environment offers positive personal role models in its faculty. It provides a place for open discussion where diversity and differences are respected; communication between adults and students is encouraged and supported; and conflict is managed and mediated constructively. Cultures and climates of safety support environments in which teachers and administrators pay attention to students' social and emotional needs as well as their academic needs. Such environments emphasize "emotional intelligence," as well as educational or intellectual pursuits (p. 11) (Guide).

Schools that emphasize personal contact and connection between school officials and students will take steps to identify and work with students who have few perceptible connections to the school. For example, during staff meetings in a school in a California School District, the names of students are posted, and school faculty members are asked to put stars next to the names of those students with whom they have the closest relationships. Faculty members then focus on establishing relationships with those students with few stars next to their names (P. 12) (Guide).

How does properly designed "threat assessment" work?

Six principles form the foundation of the threat assessment process. These principles are:

- Targeted violence is the end result of an understandable, and oftentimes discernible, process of thinking and behavior.

- Targeted violence stems from an interaction among the individual, the situation, the setting, and the target.

- An investigative, skeptical, inquisitive mindset is critical to successful threat assessment.

- Effective threat assessment is based upon facts, rather than on characteristics or "traits."

- An "integrated systems approach" should guide threat assessment inquiries and investigations.

- The central question in a threat assessment inquiry or investigation is whether a student poses a threat, not whether the student has made a threat.

In a threat assessment, bits of information might be viewed as pieces of a puzzle. Each bit may appear inconsequential or only slightly worrisome by itself. But, when the pieces are put together–as oftentimes has occurred in "after the fact" analyses of school attacks–the behaviors and communications of a student may coalesce into a discernible pattern that indicates a threat of violence. In many school attacks, information existed within the school and community that might have alerted authorities to the risk of attack posed by a particular student.

Relationships with agencies and service systems within the school and the surrounding community are critical to identifying, assessing, and managing students who are on a path toward carrying out a school attack. An integrated systems approach recognizes the necessity

of cooperation and partnerships between schools and systems outside of the school. These may include law enforcement, social services and mental health providers, the courts, community agencies, families, worksites, religious organizations, and others (p. 32) (Guide).

Although some individuals who threaten harm may pose a real threat of targeted violence, many do not. The Safe School Initiative found that fewer than 20 percent of school shooters communicated a direct or conditional threat to their target before the attack. By contrast, individuals who are found to pose threats of violence frequently do not make threats to their targets. The study found that in more than 80 percent of the cases, school shooters did not threaten their targets directly, but they did communicate their intent and/or plans to others before the attack (p. 33) (Guide).

[W]hen conducting an inquiry or investigation regarding a potential threat, the inquirer or investigator will find that different people in the student's life may have different–and possibly small–pieces of the puzzle. It is the responsibility of the threat assessment team to gather this information from what may be multiple sources–teachers, parents, friends, guidance counselors, after-school program staff, part-time employers, and others . . . (p. 35) (Guide).

Students and adults who know the student who is the subject of the threat assessment inquiry should be asked about communications or other behaviors that may indicate the student of concern's ideas or intent. The focus of these interviews should be factual:

 • What was said? To whom?

 • What was written? To whom?

 • What was done?

 • When and where did this occur?

 • Who else observed this behavior?

 • Did the student say why he or she acted as they did?

Bystanders, observers, and other people who were there when the student engaged in threatening behaviors or made threatening statements should be queried about whether any of these behaviors or statements concerned or worried them. These individuals should be asked about changes in the student's attitudes and behaviors. Likewise, they should be asked if they have become increasingly concerned about the student's behavior or state of mind.

However, individuals interviewed generally should not be asked to characterize the student or interpret meanings of communications that the student may have made. Statements such as "I think he's really dangerous" or "he said it with a smile, so I knew that he must be joking" may not be accurate characterizations of the student's intent, and therefore are unlikely to be useful to the threat assessment team . . . (p. 52) (Guide).

What are some additional implications of the safe schools research?

[a] First and foremost, this finding suggests that students can be an important part of prevention efforts. A friend or schoolmate may be the first person to hear that a student is thinking about or

planning to harm someone. Nevertheless, for a variety of reasons, those who have information about a potential incident of targeted school violence may not alert an adult on their own. Schools can encourage students to report this information in part by identifying and breaking down barriers in the school environment that inadvertently may discourage students from coming forward with this information . . .

In addition, this finding highlights the importance in an inquiry of attempts to gather all relevant information from anyone who may have contact with the student. Efforts to gather all potentially relevant pieces of information, however innocuous they may appear on their own, from all individuals with whom the student has contact may help to develop a more comprehensive picture of the student's ideas, activities and plans. In the end, investigators may find that different people in the student's life have different pieces of the puzzle (p. 32-33) (Secret Service).

[b] Rather than trying to determine the "type" of student who may engage in targeted school violence, an inquiry should focus instead on a student's behaviors and communications to determine if that student appears to be planning or preparing for an attack. Rather than asking whether a particular student "looks like" those who have launched school-based attacks before, it is more productive to ask whether the student is engaging in behaviors that suggest preparations for an attack, if so how fast the student is moving toward attack, and where intervention may be possible (p.34) (Secret Service).

[c] Most students who face a significant loss, or who have difficulty coping with such a loss, are not going to be at risk for a school-based attack. However, information that indicates a student is facing or having trouble dealing with a significantly difficult situation may indicate a need to refer the student to appropriate services and resources (p. 35) (Secret Service).

[d] [E]ducators can play a part in prevention by creating an environment where students feel comfortable telling an adult whenever they hear about someone who is considering doing harm to another person, or even whether the person is considering harming themselves. Once such an environment is created, it will remain important that the adults in that environment listen to students and handle the information they receive in a fair and responsible manner (p. 42) (Secret Service).

In an environment that encourages communication between students and adults, information does not remain "secret" until it is too late. In fact, it is considered good citizenship or even heroic to go to a teacher to share the fact that a fellow student is in trouble and may be contemplating a dangerous act (p. 13) (Guide).

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"Hear the case before you decide it."

-Alfred P. Murrah, (Chief Judge of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Tenth Circuit and Director of the Federal Judicial Center)

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