

MITIGATING THE RISK OF SCHOOL VIOLENCE: PRACTICAL SECURITY MEASURES

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The recent tragedy at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut raises many serious questions about violence in our schools, including such issues as mental health treatment, the influence of mass media & video games, gun control, school security and many others. All told, 28 people were killed including 20 young students, 6 school staff, the perpetrator, 20-year old Adam Lanza, and his mother, whom he killed earlier the morning of the attack. In this article, we are going to address the practical steps can schools take to mitigate the risk of such violence.

In the past 4 years, since January 2009, there have been 92 shooting incidents on school campuses in the United States, from the elementary level to the college level, leaving some 70 people dead (not all shooting incidents caused fatalities), including students, teachers, administrators, employees and others, according to the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence.¹ That statistic represents a shocking frequency of nearly 2 incidents per month.

This does not include non-gun related violence which also occurs on campuses with regularity. According to the US Department of Education, there were 828,000 nonfatal violent incidents among students in the US between the ages of 12 and 18 in 2010 and approximately 7 percent of teachers reported that they have been threatened with bodily injury or have been physically attacked by a student at their school.² In a 2011 survey of youth violence conducted by the US Centers for Disease Control & Prevention, a full 5.4% of respondents reported carrying a weapon on school property on one or more days in the 30 days prior to the survey.³

¹ [The Brady Campaign To Prevent Gun Violence](#), 2012

² [US Department of Education](#), 2011

³ [Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance – US 2011](#), US Centers for Disease Control & Prevention, 2011

And yet contrary to public perception, a 2010 study by the National School Safety Center has shown that homicides in schools have actually been on the decline since they peaked in 1993.⁴ This trend does not mean that violence on campus is going to go away any time soon, as the Newtown incident graphically demonstrates. Prudence requires practical security precautions and response mechanisms be instituted by all educational institutions.

What practical steps can educational institutions take to mitigate this risk?

Clearly, it is impossible to completely prevent threats and violent incidents from occurring in schools. Nor can turning a school into Fort Knox solve the problem –it would cease to function as intended. Unfortunately, the cold reality is that a truly determined individual – deranged or otherwise – can gain access to a campus and/or into a school facility with the intent to cause violence, particularly if they are a student, faculty, administrator, employee or vendor affiliated with the institution. The key is to be able to identify high risk individuals before they cause harm, slow them down with sensible security measures and allow for rapid and decisive response from authorities.

The 12 Deadliest School Attacks In US History

5/18/1927 – Bath, MI – School board treasurer, Andrew Kehoe, 55, kills 44 at Bath Elementary School.

4/16/2007 – Blacksburg, VA – Student Seung-Hui Cho, 23, kills 32 at Virginia Tech and before committing suicide.

12/14/2012 – Newtown, CT – Adam Lanza, 20, kills 26 at Sandy Hook Elementary School before committing suicide.

8/1/1966 – Austin, TX – Former student Charles Whitman, 25, kills 14 at the University of Texas.

4/20/1999 – Columbine, CO – Students Eric Harris, 18, and Dylan Klebold, 17, kill 13 at Columbine High School then both commit suicide.

7/12/1976 – Fullerton, CA – School janitor Edward Allaway, 37, kills 7 at Cal State University.

4/2/2012 – Oakland, CA – Former student One Goh, 43 kills 7 at Oikos University.

3/21/2005 – Red Lake, MN – Student Jeffrey Weise, 16, kills 7 at Red Lake High School before committing suicide.

2/14/2008 – DeKalb, IL – Former student Steven Kamierczak, 27, kills 5 at Northern Illinois University before committing suicide.

11/1/1991 – Iowa City, IA – Former graduate student Gang Lu, 28, kills 5 at the University of Iowa before committing suicide.

10/2/2006 – Nickel Mines, PA – Truck driver Charles Roberts, 32 kills 5 at the West Nickel Mines School before committing suicide.

1/17/1989 – Stockton, CA – Patrick Purdy, 24, kills 5 at Cleveland Elementary School before committing suicide.

Data compiled by Matthew R. Marquet

⁴ [National School Safety Center](#), 2010

The Newtown, Connecticut police chief, Michael Kehoe, credits the security measures and training of school staff with actually saving lives during this horrific event. There could easily have been more fatalities had the school not been locked at 9:30 when Lanza arrived – forcing him to shoot out a window near the office and alerting everyone – a prompt 911 call from the office and a teacher who immediately hid her students in a closet, causing Lanza to pass by the class entirely before nearly wiping out the next classroom – among other measures.

As such, comprehensive program for educational institutions of all sizes can significantly reduce the risk of violent individuals by helping **prevent and respond** to incidents when they occur. Not surprisingly, **prevention** begins with education. Most violent incidents in schools are not caused by someone who “just snapped.” There are often behavioral clues prior to the violence. Some of these include threatening statements made or posted online by the potential perpetrator, a prior history of violence or significant lifestyle changes. An informed staff, particularly teachers, administrators and counselors, is the first-line of defense. They are generally the ones who are closest to the risk community and may be able to serve as trip wires in recognizing serious situations that may lead to violence. Specific **training** is necessary to help this group see the warning signs and be in a position to take action, if warranted. The training of teachers and administrators should include such elements as aggression management, conflict resolution, listening and communications skills and the identification of “red flag” warning signs.

The student body is also on the front-line and education and awareness provided at appropriate periodic forums is a prudent idea. Parents also fall into this front-line category and regular communications with teachers, counselors and administrators is recommended. They can serve as a critical link to report problematic situations developing with students who may need counseling or other psychiatric care. Remember, violence on campus can come from any number of directions: students, teachers, administrators, employees, parents, relatives, vendors and even terrorists. As such, each interest group needs to be involved.

Security precautions are also necessary. One such preventive yet controversial measure is the presence of armed police details periodically on site. Communities routinely mandate **police details** at public work sites and this policy could also be employed at schools within their jurisdiction. The critical times for their presence would include the morning drop-off hours and the afternoon pick-up times. Random visits also help create a deterrent effect.

As was evident in the Newtown incident, **access control** is also critical in deterring, slowing down or stopping a would-be violent individual. Perimeter and access points should be monitored by CCTV, including parking areas. All entry doors should have adequate access control as well as allow for school personnel to remotely control them from within the school building during locked hours; doors should be solid metal with tempered glass reinforced with metal wires; the exterior and the interior of the schools should be equipped with audible functioning alarms.

Communications are key – both within the school and with the outside world. A central functioning PA communications system is critical and should be periodically tested. In addition to fire alarms, so-called “panic buttons” in appropriate locations should also be installed and periodically tested – allowing for direct alerts to authorities if a serious problem develops.

Security policies and procedures need to be well defined and drilled. For example, **lock down** as well as **evacuation** procedures should be well known to school officials and practiced on a periodic basis. All class rooms should have solid doors which can be opened from the class room side. A zero tolerance policy on weapons possession for non-approved individuals (i.e. police personnel, on-campus security personnel) should be adopted.

Rapid response to an incident requires good preparation. Educational institutions should have an updated and tested crisis plan, with established and identified members of its crisis response team as well as a designated crisis

center with alternate site available. The crisis team should be trained using a variety of simulated incidents. It is far better to be prepared for an incident than to be forced to react to one in an ad-hoc manner.

Effectively dealing with the **aftermath** and trauma caused by such incidents is also critical. For example, grief and trauma counseling should be immediately made available. Ongoing cooperation and coordination of follow-up investigation by authorities will be necessary and the crisis team should be prepared for potentially protracted efforts.

Thought question: Have adequate resources been allocated to conduct an independent risk and security assessment study at your schools? If not, there is both federal and state assistance to do so.

As we have seen, a well prepared institution, with practiced policies, including prevention, response and post-event planning, is essential to mitigating the risks of violence in schools.

Resources

There are many good resources available to assist educational institutions with their school violence crisis planning and just a few are outlined below. The Guide for Preventing and Responding to School Violence, published by the International Association of Police Chiefs, updated in 2009, we found to be particularly helpful.

[Understanding School Violence](#), US Centers for Disease Control, 2012

[A Guide To Safe Schools](#), US Department of Education

[Campus Attacks: Targeted Violence Affecting Institutions of Higher Learning](#), US Secret Service, US Department of Education and the US FBI, April 2010

[Guide for Preventing and Responding to School Violence](#), International Association of Chiefs of Police, 2nd Ed., 2009

[Crime in Schools and Colleges](#), US FBI, November 2007

[Practical Information on Crisis Planning: A Guide For Schools and Communities](#), US Department of Education, January 2001

[Helping Children Cope With School Violence](#), Lifecare, Inc., 2006

[Preventing School Violence: A Practical Guide To Comprehensive Planning](#), Indiana University

[School Crisis Response Initiative](#), US Department of Justice, September 2003

[Secret Service Safe Schools Initiative](#), US Secret Service & US Dept. of Education, 2002

[Checklist for Developing a Plan for School Safety and Crisis Response](#), State of Michigan, Department of Education, 2001

[The School Shooter: A Threat Assessment Perspective](#), US FBI, 1999

[Reducing Violence In US Schools](#), Dispute Resolution Journal, November 1998

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