School Shootings and Solutions
by Scott Poland, Ed.D., and Carlye Conte, M.S.

School Shootings: Misperceptions v. Reality

Despite public perception, school violence in general, and school shootings specifically, have not increased in recent years. In fact, schools are one of the safest places for children, adolescents, and young adults. Homicide is the third leading cause of death for youth between the ages of 10 and 24, yet only 1% of these homicides occur within an educational setting (Kann et al., 2014; Robers, Kemp, Rathbun, & Morgan, 2014). A review of FBI data showed that within a five-year period there were a total of 49 homicides occurring within a school (Cornell, 2015). Based on the number of homicides that occurred outside of a school setting during that same time period, the odds of a child being a homicide victim at school is 1 in 4.5 million (Brock, 2015).

The FBI recently published a study of active shooter incidents occurring between the years of 2000 and 2013; of the 160 total incidents, 39 were identified as occurring within institutions of primary and secondary education (Blair & Schweit, 2014). Sadly, almost half of the 117 school-place fatalities resulted from the massive school shooting incidents that occurred at Virginia Tech and Sandy Hook Elementary School. The tragic and inexplicable nature of school shootings such as these creates the public misperception that schools are inherently unsafe and that targeted acts of school violence occur at alarming rates. Despite the relative rarity of their occurrence, the fact that school shootings do occur necessitates an understanding of what can be done to prevent these extreme acts of violence in the future. In order for youth to thrive educationally, we must ensure that they are provided with safety and security within all aspects of the educational environment.

Current Responses to School Violence

Schools have adopted a variety of prevention and intervention procedures in an attempt to prepare for, respond to, and reduce, acts of school violence. One example is armed assailant drills which have been recommended by the U.S. Department of Education as an addition to lockdown-only drill approaches (2013). These training drills center on three main options when confronted with an armed assailant: run, hide, or fight (2013). Although the 'fight' option is considered a last resort, school safety experts have expressed concern about teaching students and faculty techniques such as attacking an armed gunmen and state that certain considerations must be taken into account to prevent inadvertent consequences resulting from such training (Trump, 2013).

According to the Best Practice Considerations released by the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP), training drills should be developmentally appropriate and tailored to the physical, emotional, and psychological needs of the students (2014). Any training program implemented within the school environment must account for the unique needs of all students and include special provisions for participants with trauma histories, mental health problems, developmental limitations, or physical disabilities. In order to support the continued use of current training practices, research into program effectiveness is necessary. The use of pre-and-post-test measures are recommended to determine if students and faculty feel safer following participation in armed assailant drills or if they are left feeling confused and frightened. Follow-up support in the form of mental health services should always be available to allow students and faculty to process any emotional or psychological reactions that can arise from such experiences.

NASP recommends a hierarchy of crisis preparedness drills beginning with discussion-based exercises such as a review of crisis response procedures, an organized orientation that includes familiarizing participants with school resources, safety seminars led by a multidisciplinary team of professionals, and tabletop discussion groups (2014). Following discussion-based exercises, schools may choose to implement operations-based exercises such as emergency walk-throughs and preannounced or unannounced drills. The use of more advanced exercises – such as simulation drills and full-scale simulation exercises – should be based on a needs-assessment of each specific school. Additionally, the potentially traumatizing nature of realistic simulation drills should be taken into account to ensure that the psychological costs of such practices are not outweighed by its potential safety benefits.

Intervention and Post-vention

School security planning and crisis preparedness should be implemented prior to the occurrence of a tragedy, with an emphasis on acting instead of reacting (Trump, 2011). Comprehensive safety planning should adhere to best practice models and include multidisciplinary collaboration among teachers, administrators, principals, students, parents, law enforcement, guidance counselors, coaches, additional school personnel, and mental health professionals. Crisis teams should be formed prior to acts of school violence and all members should be properly trained in prevention, intervention, and postvention procedures (Erbacher, Singer, & Poland, 2015). An example training program developed by the NASP is PREPaRE, which stands for: Prevent and prepare for psychological trauma, Reaffirm physical health and perceptions of safety, Evaluate psychological trauma risk, Provide interventions and Respond to psychological needs, and Examine the effectiveness of crisis prevention and intervention (2015). The PREPaRE curriculum is offered through a series of two training workshops which focus on crisis prevention, preparedness, development of a multidisciplinary school safety team, crisis intervention, and recovery.

Following a school shooting, it is important that appropriate services are offered to those within the school and surrounding community to promote recovery, resiliency, and psychological well-being. A program such as Psychological First Aid can be implemented immediately after a traumatic event to provide supportive services such as stabilization, practical assistance, connection with social supports, and linkage with collaborative services (Brymer et al., 2006). Although immediate intervention is necessary, post-vention services, or the continuation of supportive and assistive intervention techniques, are also crucial to promote long-term resiliency. Mental health professionals play a critical role during this period and should be utilized so that students and faculty are given the opportunity to process thoughts, feelings, or emotions that may arise and express any remaining worries about safety in the future. Dimensions of vulnerability such as geographic proximity, psychosocial proximity, and at-risk populations should be identified so that interventions can focus on these 'circles of vulnerability' (Erbacher, Singer, & Poland, 2015). These vulnerability factors should guide the provision of long-term services during follow-up periods for individuals exposed to school violence.

Prevention: Creating a Climate of School Safety

Threat assessment is the comprehensive and systematic evaluation of violence risk once a threat has been made. Each school should have a threat assessment team and clearly delineated procedures for responding to any and all threats. Once a threat has been identified, the severity level can be classified to determine if the threat is transient (e.g. emotion-based, reactive, and lacking specificity) or substantial (e.g. premeditated and detailed, with an explicit intention of harm). Following a comprehensive evaluation, threat assessment teams should determine the most appropriate course of action and implement immediate interventions to manage and reduce the risk of possible violence (Poland, 2008). During the threat intervention stage, mental health professionals play a fundamental role in identifying both risk and protective factors and offering recommendations for treatment that promote the safety of everyone involved. Treatment should be personalized and address the combination of psychological, social, ecological, and educational factors that contribute to youth violence. For an example threat assessment program that utilizes a seven step decision tree process and has shown positive results through field testing refer to Cornell and Sheras' Virginia Model of Threat Assessment (2005).

Effective reporting systems and the availability of mental health services are perquisites to the successful operation of threat assessment procedures. According to the Safe School Initiative Report, almost all of the current or former students who perpetrated acts of school violence demonstrated behaviors prior to the incident that concerned those around them or told others about their plans prior to carrying them out (Vossekuil et al., 2002). Furthermore, almost all of the attackers had experienced a recent loss, had a history of suicidal ideation or attempts, and suffered from mental health problems such as depression. Oftentimes, suicide is the primary motivation for these attacks with homicidal intent developing after suicidal ideation (Joiner, 2013). Suicide awareness training and suicide prevention programs should be a mandatory component of school curriculums in order to prevent student's acts of violence against themselves or others.

The best form of intervention is prevention and this can be achieved by providing students with what has been termed a 'climate of safety' (Poland, 2014). A safe and supportive school environment is one which fosters a willingness for students to come forward with information regarding potential threats by promoting respect, ensuring that student concerns will be taken seriously, and assuring that any and all threats will be adequately addressed (Fein et al., 2002).

This atmosphere can by facilitated within an educational environment by encouraging positive, respectful, and collaborative relationships among students, faculty, and other school personnel (Poland, 2014). In turn, collaborative relationships can promote communication and increase the likelihood that students will seek out an adult if confronted with potential threats of violence.

Students play an important role in reducing school violence and should be given the opportunity to be thoroughly involved in school safety planning. Student involvement can be promoted through the implementation of student safety task forces, the election of student officials to serve as school safety representatives, and the creation of student safety pledges. Example programs that cultivate a climate of safety and encourage student participation include Students Against Violence Everywhere (SAVE) and Striving To Reduce Youth Violence Everywhere (STRYVE). Parents and community members should also be encouraged to actively participate in school safety planning. Safe and Sound Schools is a non-profit organization founded by Alissa Parker and Michele Gay, who lost their daughters during the Sandy Hook tragedy. This initiative provides information on increasing community involvement in safety planning and resources such as the Straight-A School Safety Model toolkit (2015).

Conclusion: Addressing the Needs of Students and Parents Affected by School Tragedies

Having worked as a school psychologist for nearly 30 years, crisis prevention and intervention have been my top priorities. I have been personally asked to serve on numerous national crisis teams and provide assistance in the aftermath of school tragedies. In my experience, parents of school violence victims call for increased mental health services for children, increased religious participation in schools, improved supervision and better parenting skills, a reduction in children's access to guns and exposure to violent media, and an increased sense of connectedness among students, parents, school personnel, and the surrounding community. Increased funding and legislative action is necessary so schools can implement programs that address violence prevention, anger management, conflict resolution, and effective problem-solving skills. Community-based programs such as mentorship and youth groups are important to provide students with prosocial recreational activities and an opportunity to build positive relationships with community leaders. The majority of school tragedies could have been prevented, and the loss of even one life at school is one too many. In order to ensure that schools are safe and nurturing environments, all students, faculty, parents, and community members, must be committed to making school safety an utmost priority.

For more information on school violence, threat assessment, prevention, intervention, and post-vention, refer to our upcoming book chapter (Poland & Conte, in press).

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Dr. Scott Poland is a Licensed Psychologist, a Nationally Certified School Psychologist, a Professor at the Center for Psychological Studies, Co-Director of the Suicide and Violence Prevention Office, Co-Director SAMHSA Grant for Expansion of Suicide Prevention Initiatives Off Campus, was the Past Prevention Division Director American Association of Suicidology, and Past President National Association of School Psychologists.

Carlye Conte is a third year clinical psychology student at Nova Southeastern University. As part of the forensic psychology concentration, Carlye Conte has clinical experience working with adults and juveniles in both community and correctional settings. Her research interests include women in the criminal justice system, wrongful convictions, and false confessions. Ms. Conte is also the program manager of the Forensic Psychology Master's Program, a research coordinator for the Women and False Confessions project, a member of the Suicide and Violence Prevention Program, and is passionate about all aspects of crisis intervention.