

**Violence in Schools:  
Warning Signs & Aspects of Risk Management<sup>1</sup>**

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On February 14, 2018, Nikolas Cruz, a former student at Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, went on a shooting rampage at the high school armed with an AR-15 assault-style rifle killing 17 people and wounding at least 15 others. Assault-style rifles also were used at the Sandy Hook Elementary School massacre and several of the deadliest mass shootings.

There were 427 mass shootings in the US in 2017.<sup>2</sup> Thus far this year, there have been 45 mass shootings.<sup>3</sup> The Parkland school shooting was one of several firearm attacks during school hours in a year that is only a month and a half old.<sup>4</sup>

Considerable information has emerged by now about the gunman, Nikolas Cruz:

- He had been getting treatment at a mental health clinic but stopped going.
- He had been expelled from school for disciplinary problems.
- There were Instagram posts and reports that he liked shooting animals.
- His father died a few years ago, and his mother, among the only people with whom he was close, died around Thanksgiving.
- He was living at a friend's house and was showing signs of depression.
- He had a fascination with guns and owned an AR-15 assault-style rifle.  
<https://tinyurl.com/ydz336yb>

It was alleged that Cruz had made a comment on YouTube that he wished to be a professional school shooter. See:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/15/us/nikolas-cruz-florida-shooting.html>

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<sup>1</sup> This article is intended to briefly summarize some key issues pertaining to school violence in the aftermath of the tragic mass shooting at Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, on February 14, 2018. There is considerable research and a plethora of publications in the area of violence, mass shootings, violence and mass shootings in schools, risk and behavioral threat assessment, and risk management for the interested reader to review.

<sup>2</sup> See: <https://www.massshootingtracker.org/data/2017>

<sup>3</sup> See: <https://www.massshootingtracker.org/data/2018>

<sup>4</sup> See Snopes for how they classify school shootings: <https://tinyurl.com/ycmzvzyh>

Questions and criticism have been levied towards the FBI: what did they know about Cruz and why did they not take action?

Attorney General Jeff Sessions on Friday [February 16, 2018] ordered an "immediate review" after it emerged that the FBI had not acted on a recent tip that Florida school shooting suspect Nikolas Cruz wanted to "kill people" and there was the "potential of him conducting a school shooting."

In a statement, the bureau admitted to receiving a call on Jan. 5 from a person close to Cruz who contacted the FBI through its Public Access Line (PAL) tipline to express concerns about his erratic behavior and disturbing social media posts.

<https://tinyurl.com/yc5p3vsf>

Although mass shootings are statistically extremely rare events, they command huge media attention that reinforces stigmatizing stereotypes.

For the survivors and families of victims, however, these are not statistically rare events at all. It really happened to them. It affects all of us as well. We suffer the tragic loss of lives and injuries and our way of life is shaken and we feel threatened and no longer safe.

There is some indication that mass shootings are occurring more frequently with deadlier results:

Overall, mass shootings have increased in frequency and deadliness according to a Mother Jones database that focuses on public attacks in which the motive appeared to be an indiscriminate killing. The Mother Jones data shows some sharp spikes and plummets – a "zigzag," says Maria Tcherni-Buzzeo, a criminal justice professor at the University of New Haven [notes that] Overall, there is a rise, which she calls "puzzling" as violence in general trends downward.

There is no single, obvious reason for the increase, she says, but "you can't escape the conclusion that accessibility of weapons of essentially mass destruction definitely makes a contribution."

<https://tinyurl.com/ycdthsnt>

How can one see this coming? How can one prepare for this? There may be little that can be done to anticipate that a particular person could become a school shooter. There were signs in the case of Nikolas Cruz as noted above. Consider as well:

A 2004 federal study of school shootings — which researchers agree remains relevant and accurate in its assessment — identified 37 incidents of targeted school violence involving 41 attackers from 1974 to June 2000.

In 81% of the incidents, at least one person had information that the attacker was thinking about or planning a school attack. In more than half of the incidents — 59% — more than one person knew, according to the study, which was conducted jointly by the U.S. Secret Service and U.S. Department of Education.

The majority of the time, the shooter told a peer, such as a schoolmate, friend or sibling. In some cases, people knew exactly what the attacker had planned, while in others, they had an understanding that something "big" or "bad" was going to happen. And in several cases, people knew when and where the attack was planned. In only two cases did an adult have information about the attacker's threat or plan.

<https://tinyurl.com/y8cn85n8>

And there are a number of indicators that can be looked at or examined as part of an overall threat assessment protocol (see below).

What risk management models can we look at to safeguard the public?

Risk management is very complex and multifaceted. It involves the coordinated efforts of numerous agencies and experts in many fields. It is context and situation-specific. And it involves the identification, assessment, and prioritization of various risks.

An essential aspect of prevention awareness is to identify risks based on other incidents and examine recent trends and developments.

There is much that can be done to improve security/safety measures, anticipate when risk may increase (for instance, the observable changes and behaviors exhibited by Nikolas Cruz), and intervene quickly and efficiently in a crisis to help mitigate damage.

The model is: Needs Assessment → Risk Assessment → Risk Management

## **Pertaining to Schools:**

### **External**

- Lighting: abundant, well placed, operational
- Parking if provided: secure, limited access points
- Entrances: secured, monitored, closed if not used
- Cameras: well-placed, maintained, and used
- Environment free of debris and potential hazards
- Security guards making security checks outside the building

### **Internal**

- Provide a safe environment
- Physical security (areas not accessible to students safeguarded and/or locked)
- Greeting and screening visitors entering the school; have them sign in; ascertain they go where they are supposed to go; have them sign out and observe them exiting the building
- Quickly intervene when an unidentified/unauthorized visitor is on the premises
- Exits: marked and lights work
- Fire extinguishers: visible, accessible, inspected
- Camera surveillance/monitoring inside the school
- Security guards: present and visible, patrolling halls and building
- Safety measures: first aid kits and supplies available; school employees who have red cross or paramedic training
- Marked evacuation plans
- Ongoing supervision of staff
- Continued school safety professional development
- Security procedures and response plans for emergencies in place
- Conduct drills: active shooter drills; lockdown drills (Code Yellow; Code Red)
- Information/intelligence sharing/collaboration (law enforcement; other school districts; community partnering; other regulatory agencies; etc.)

### **Context**

- Consider geography and location of school; community context
- What are typical or customary security/safety expectations and measures in the school district?

- Is typical enough?
- Consider situation-specific needs and security enhancements (e.g. special events; sports events; parent-teacher conferences; shows; proms; etc.)

It is important not to become complacent over time or relax because of the belief that “it can’t happen here.” Risk management is an ongoing process that requires ascertaining that risk management needs are examined on an ongoing basis and that strategies and corrective measures are implemented.

### **What You Can Do:**

- Pursue legislation to make universal background checks mandatory for gun purchases.<sup>5 6</sup>
- Pursue legislation to create a national ban on assault weapons. Gun laws can help stop gun violence (see footnotes 5, 6, & 7).<sup>7</sup>
- Create and/or support petitions.
- Be aware of and contribute to strategies and efforts undertaken to help combat gangs, selling drugs, and bullying.
- Support NYSPA’s efforts to have a Duty to Protect Bill passed.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> See NY State’s Safe Act: <http://legislation.nysenate.gov/pdf/bills/2013/S2230>

<sup>6</sup> Note criticism: See: <http://www.citylandnyc.org/assault-rifles-impact-new-york-states-safe-act/>

While the SAFE Act was a political triumph, its implementation has been problematic and its enforcement practically non-existent.

The SAFE Act’s impact on gun crime, suicides and accidents has never been seriously assessed, although both gun control proponents and gun rights advocates make extravagant claims. In truth, there seems little likelihood that the SAFE Act has had much, if any, effect since it has been only partially implemented, almost completely unenforced, and widely ignored. Its various provisions are easily circumvented.

<sup>7</sup> Of concern: See: <https://tinyurl.com/ybzzmpvq>

Not even people on the terrorist watch list are barred from purchasing assault-style rifles.

A number of states, including California, Connecticut, Massachusetts, Maryland, New Jersey and New York, have laws limiting or banning the sale of assault weapons. California, for example, has banned AR-15s and other rifles with detachable magazines, which allow shooters to quickly reload. However a recent feature called a “bullet button” allows magazines to be quickly replaced, while still technically remaining fixed, rendering this law largely ineffective. State lawmakers attempted to close this loophole by introducing legislation prohibiting future sales of rifles with bullet buttons, but gun owners have found ways around the ban.

Gun manufacturers have also managed to easily circumvent other state laws by making small modifications to the weapons, such as replacing the grip or other components.

Know warning signs (i.e. risk factors associated with violence)<sup>9 10</sup>:

- Early onset aggressive behavior
- Overt threats of violence
- Fascination or obsession with firearms
- Easy & unsupervised access to firearms; preparation/practice
- Excessive aggressive behavior
- Bullying
- Discipline problems
- Antisocial conduct
- Intolerance
- Expressions of hopelessness, distress, despair, despondency, suicidal ideation
- Overt acts such as bringing a weapon to school; bragging about doing something; confiding with a peer; social media postings; destruction of property; truancy/cutting classes
- Criminal behavior; involvement with the law; courts; multiple offenses
- Marginalized/rejected/isolated from peers
- Significant behavioral changes and changes in appearance
- Significant changes in school performance
- Changes in diagnosed mental disorders
- Undiagnosed mental illnesses may warrant attention
- Alcohol & substance abuse

These indicators are associated with violence (i.e. correlates) and presence does not necessarily mean that a person will commit a violent act. A more serious sign or multiple signs or a pattern over time warrants closer observation, monitoring, and possible intervention. Violence assessment provides predictions of violence that are imprecise and false positive and false negative rates can be high. Comprehensive assessments may identify high risk situations that warrant implementing risk-reduction interventions.

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<sup>8</sup> A6849 (Steck)/S775-A (Carlucci) See:

<https://www.nysenate.gov/legislation/bills/2017/A6849>

This bill would allow psychologists to take reasonable steps to reduce or eliminate the risk of harm when a patient has directly communicated threats of serious, imminent, harm against a specific person or persons, and demonstrates a serious intent and ability to complete the harm; this legislation would also provide immunity from disciplinary or civil action if such information was reported. This protection currently exists for licensed psychologists working in state-operated mental health facilities.

<sup>9</sup> See: *Sandy Hook Promise: Know the Signs*

<https://tinyurl.com/yax5nntt>

<sup>10</sup> See: *Gun Violence: Prediction, Prevention and Policy. APA Panel of Experts Report*, American Psychological Association, 2013

<http://www.apa.org/pubs/info/reports/gun-violence-report.pdf>

A general violence risk assessment process performed by a forensic expert consists of the following according to Jeremy F. Mills:<sup>11</sup>

- 1) Information gathering/psychosocial context
- 2) Identify risk factors
- 3) Form an estimate of risk
- 4) Communicate the estimate of risk
- 5) Identify risk factors for interventions/treatment/monitoring
- 6) Articulate risk management strategies

Additional things to consider:

In Nassau County there is a new smartphone emergency alert system — RAVE Panic Button — an Active Shooter app. See:

<https://www.ravemobilesafety.com/panic-button/>)

Nassau County announced that several local public school districts have adopted a new smartphone-based emergency alert system.

Once an alert is issued by school personnel, police can automatically access critical contact information and floor plans, control remote door locks and view live footage from closed-circuit security cameras so that responding officers receive real-time intelligence.

In addition, first responders will be able to use the app on smartphones and tablets on site, giving them greater situational awareness so they can react to emergencies including active shooters.

<https://tinyurl.com/yaa5lwx9>

Suffolk has a similar emergency alert system:

<https://tinyurl.com/ybwulomb>

Here is information about another alert system: the Hero911 app:

<http://www.hero911.org/resources/for-police-by-police/>

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<sup>11</sup> Canadian Psychology/Psychologie canadienne, Vol 58(1), Feb 2017, 40-49  
<http://psycnet.apa.org/doiLanding?doi=10.1037%2Fcap0000100>

Homeland Security and other agencies offer active shooter preparedness training. Some of the booklets offer very useful information worth clipping and sharing:

- <https://www.dhs.gov/active-shooter-preparedness>
- [https://www.dhs.gov/xlibrary/assets/active shooter booklet.pdf](https://www.dhs.gov/xlibrary/assets/active_shooter_booklet.pdf)
- <https://www.ready.gov/active-shooter>
- <https://tinyurl.com/yawexzyc>

Here is a link to a graphic video on surviving an active shooter event:

<http://www.activeshooter.lasd.org/>

Prediction and prediction models only go so far. Prevention **must** be ongoing and saves lives when carefully considered, planned, and implemented.