

5-16-2019

Precursors of School Shootings

Branden Harrington
San Jose State University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.sjsu.edu/themis>

 Part of the [Criminology Commons](#), [Social Control, Law, Crime, and Deviance Commons](#), [Social Psychology Commons](#), and the [Social Psychology and Interaction Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Harrington, Branden (2019) "Precursors of School Shootings," *Themis: Research Journal of Justice Studies and Forensic Science*: Vol. 7 , Article 7.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.sjsu.edu/themis/vol7/iss1/7>

This Peer-Reviewed Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Justice Studies at SJSU ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Themis: Research Journal of Justice Studies and Forensic Science by an authorized editor of SJSU ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@sjsu.edu.

Precursors of School Shootings

Abstract

This paper analyzes mass school shootings in the United States, stressing their root causes, indicators, demographics, and suggestive guidelines for preventable measures. Data draws associations between bullying, social dominance, and devalued masculinity amongst high school boys. Further, these trends emphasize homophobic harassment and the reassertion of lost dominance through violence. Moreover, research upholds media coverage and self-absorbed behavior as an additional precursor for inspired acts of malice. Journalistic representations of mass school shootings are identified as a source of motivation for vengeful and easily malleable youth. Studies also stress the importance of school inclusivity and interconnectedness, emitting a stark correlation to the level of violence in schools across America. In turn, applicable solutions are best represented by Effective Behavioral Support and violence prevention methods practiced by teachers and campus staff. In addition, school security upheld positive results as well, whether executed by armed guards or fencing.

Keywords

school shootings, adolescent males, indicators

Precursors of School Shootings

*Branden Harrington***Abstract**

This paper analyzes mass school shootings in the United States, stressing their root causes, indicators, demographics, and suggestive guidelines for preventable measures. Data draws associations between bullying, social dominance, and devalued masculinity amongst high school boys. Further, these trends emphasize homophobic harassment and the reassertion of lost dominance through violence. Moreover, research upholds media coverage and self-absorbed behavior as an additional precursor for inspired acts of malice. Journalistic representations of mass school shootings are identified as a source of motivation for vengeful and easily malleable youth. Studies also stress the importance of school inclusivity and interconnectedness, emitting a stark correlation to the level of violence in schools across America. In turn, applicable solutions are best represented by Effective Behavioral Support and violence prevention methods practiced by teachers and campus staff. In addition, school security upheld positive results as well, whether executed by armed guards or fencing.

Introduction

Since the hysteria of the massacre at Columbine High School, mass shootings in schools have been a regular occurrence in the United States. Not only has it been a persistent issue that has yet to be solved, but its malignant nature continues to make the cover of news headlines. It has proven to be such an issue that Agnich (2015) and Gius (2014) suggest school rampages have practically doubled since 1981. Further, 53% of the time, these shootings are found to be on K-12 campuses and are statistically the product of self-absorbed teenage boys who are outcasts and have a stout history of victimhood or who suffer from some sort of personal loss (Kimmel & Mahler, 2003). Moreover, they exhibit traits of narcissism, sadism, and a lack of both conscience and empathy, which may be the product of their peers, family, or icons (Langman, 2009). Nonetheless, this issue is prevalent today with the most current shooting, which transpired at Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida. This shooting caused the deaths of 17 students and faculty, including an additional 14 injured. It is the 290th school shooting since January of 2013 (Statista, 2018).

Given that 53% of all school shootings occur at K-12 schools, and with the most current incident occurring in February of 2018, the high school setting will be the focus of this paper. The purpose of this essay is to analyze mass school shootings in the United States, emphasizing their root causes, indicators, demographics, and suggestive guidelines for preventable measures. After examining prior literature, statistics, and trends, a policy implication will be made in the effort to prevent shooting atrocities from being committed in America's novice and lower level educational systems. The policy will be tailored to address

security in schools and previous implications of teacher and faculty intervention. If preventative measures are not considered, then the repetitive stereotype of school shootings in the United States will remain, and the safety of the American student will never be guaranteed.

Literature Review

The Correlation between Bullying, Dominance, and Masculinity in Mass School Shootings

There is a plethora of assumptions made when considering the demographics, characteristics, and motivations of a school shooter. Common preconceptions of their behavioral traits consist of impulse, anger, sensitivity, poor self-control, and inadequate social skills. Other common categories of school shooters are complimented by their young age, Caucasian complexion, and tendency to steal or own lawful firearms (Kleck, 2009). To bring all of this in, consider why these individuals choose to act in the manner in which they do. Further, ponder the environmental factors, both socially and emotionally. These are all building blocks for the archetype of the school shooter, but the main causes are best represented by their correlation to being bullied victims, challenges with heterosexual masculinity, and the persistent desire to reassert lost dominance through violence. The following sections will address these underlying factors as well as the correlations between media, narcissism, and school environment.

Both bullying and devaluing a young man of masculinity serve as stepping stones for how and why certain students commit school rampages. Klein (2006) writes on the effects of musicality and bullying in schools. She discusses the prevalence of homophobic harassment and how, over time, it may lead to anger, frustration, and tendencies to lash out in search of vengeance. Out

of the ten cases she studied, a reported five were called homophobic slurs. In all incidences of a shooting, the boys' masculinity was challenged, specifying their individual inability to initiate dominant features akin to physical attractiveness, athleticism, and height; social supremacy such as the number of and what type of friends they had; and traits of power best represented by their tendency to defend themselves when bullied. In addition, these boys lacked physical superiority, but sustained exceptional academic presence. Their body types were best described as weak and undesirable, which resulted in high amounts of social pressures, since femininity is least desired in this environment (Klein, 2006). Klein (2006) suggests following an inability to express dominant features as well as persistent homophobic harassment from peers; these student victims target their initial bully—the masculine crowd. Klein (2006) helps explain the correlation between devalued masculinity and what may result from it. The following section will provide further support for the correlation between homophobia, manhood, and violence.

When further referencing the formerly suggested criteria, what has yet to be considered is a boy's potential to lash out when faced with an inability to acquire and/or maintain relationships or friendships. Kimmel and Mahler (2003) allude to the effects of rejection, specifying denial of a romantic partner, sexual intimacy, and breakups, in which all are contributing factors that result in instances of targeting and vengeance driven personas. These factors are seen as another circumstance of devaluing masculinity. In the latter part of their study, they cite Luke Woodham as the perfect example (Kimmel & Mahler, 2003). In his case, Woodham could not stand the emotional toll of being dumped by his girlfriend, explaining at trial that it kept him from eating and

sleeping. In turn, Woodham went on a school rampage killing several classmates, emphasizing his ex-girlfriend. Kimmel and Mahler (2003) conclude with the simple formula for heterosexual masculinity: if there is a healthy combination of general acceptance amongst heterosexual men, along with occasions of intercourse with women, then gay-baiting and harassment devaluing masculinity is void and null (Kimmel & Mahler, 2003).

In occasions when bullied individuals have an inability to find either acceptance amongst heterosexual men or sustain sexual intimacy with women, they find alternative routes to reassess and reassert their dominance. Kimmel (1994) suggests that masculinity is akin to power and conquest, in which violence is the best implication of manhood. Therefore, one's desire to fight and show weakness in the other party is a key element to finding solace and confidence. After considering that the majority of school shooters are described as physically unappealing, weak, and non-masculine, it further justifies Klein's study (2006) and their need to utilize violence, or a firearm, to assert dominance.

The Correlation between Media and Narcissism in Mass School Shootings

One prudent fact behind school shootings is the culprit's influence from subliminal messages produced by media, which, in turn, influence opposition to societal narcissistic behavior. De Venanzi (2012) found a relationship between the complex nature and advancement of technology utilized by the media and increased manufactured threats. In other words, as technology evolves, and when it is used by the media, it spreads principles that may pose as risk factors for susceptible youth. For instance, when media outlets display cellphone footage of a school shooting in progress or show a shooter's manifesto from social media, it may serve as stepping stone for the next potential act. Moreover,

popular culture, peer marginalization, societal narcissism, suburban school settings, schools' punishment models, and a hierarchal social status amongst students prompt a perfect place to commit a school shooting (De Venanzi, 2012). Students who do not follow the trends of popular culture and its deadening amount of narcissism tend to be categorized as anti-social, though not always considered to be violent. Further, schools may serve as an institution of aggravation and hurt for young men who do not follow mainstream social trends. Not only does school marginalize those who have differing perspectives, but it weakens self-esteem and proctors physical and psychological cycles of abuse (De Venanzi, 2012). The Columbine shooters, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, best represent the aforementioned material since both boys were outcasts and driven by humiliation and pain, thereby using their social status to strike revenge on their school (Larkin, 2009).

In conjunction with media, movies tend to give off the idea that humanity lives in a cut-throat and primal world where dangerous manifestations of individualism follow standards of survival akin to cultural Darwinism (Schwartz, 2008). Moreover, Hollywood portrayals of victims in oppressive societies show to be the direct consequence of behavioral alienation. This may warrant great concern, since portrayals of vengeance-driven actions represented in popular culture may result in mimicked and learned behavior (Schwartz, 2008). In other words, those with a drive for vengeance may follow certain scenes or actions in film and media in pursuit of individual justice or revenge.

Further outcomes produced by media coverage of mass school shootings are best represented by copycat attacks, better known as contagion. Lankford and colleagues (2018) explain that roughly 30% of mass killings drew inspiration from prior events

due to emotional and comprehensive news coverage, which leads to possible causes for copycat attacks. In addition, contagion prompts inspiration for others to become active shooters for an extent of 14 days and that these individuals persevere to have a well-known name (Lankford et al., 2018). Further, circumstances of mass shootings situated in California, Maryland, and Virginia show the offender exhibiting narcissistic and fame-seeking gesticulations (Lankford et al., 2018). Lankford and colleagues (2018) stress the importance of concealing the identification of a shooter in journalistic reporting, since it drives potential killers to be deadlier than the last. Media remains selective with coverage involving crime and similarly to Lankford and colleagues (2018), Maguire and colleagues (2002) explain that media coverage of school rampages last several days, if not weeks, and the latest occurrence shows connection to the preceding incidents. In sum, media headlines concerning school shootings pose negative results consisting of copycat crimes (Maguire et al., 2002).

Rather than limiting journalistic strategies to avoid the “who” section of reporting in regard to mass shootings, a study conducted by Lawrence and Muller (2003) suggests well-recognized guidelines and strategies for their media coverage. Essentially, media outlets should employ sources outside of the police by including school staff, teachers, administrations, and professional scholars of criminology. Additionally, the news should provide data comparing and contrasting trends of crime by region as well as the statistics for violence in schools and their relation to national estimates. Lawrence and Muller (2003) conclude with further suggestions for media coverage. In short, news outlets should only cover certain crime stories if they have a drastic effect on the imminent community, are a danger to public welfare, and, most importantly, lead to a probable solution.

The Correlation between School Environment and Violence

What has yet to be considered is school environment: population size, teacher to student relationship, and overall connectedness. Volungis (2016) analyzes the association between school size, school interconnectedness, and violence. Remarkably, it has been shown that institutions with higher populations also yield higher rates of isolation and dissension among students. There is mounting evidence that suggests increased population size is linked to a decrease in school event participation, an increase in truancy and drop out percentages, overall lower academic achievement, and lower college enrollment percentages (Volungis, 2016). Thus, adolescent school violence has a direct correlation to the size of the school, and an increased student body will yield increased risk factors for youth to exhibit violent behavior. Volungis (2016) argues that if there is a high-quality, supportive, and secure connection between students and teachers/school personnel, there will be an increase in school connectedness. Moreover, studies have repeatedly shown that when students feel recognized, encouraged, and cared for, there are higher frequencies of school attendance, academic achievement, and graduation rates. It was also concluded that students who invest trust in their school and felt strong connectedness with their environment proved to exhibit fewer signs of suicidal and at-risk behavior (Volungis, 2016).

To further stress the importance of school connectedness, current studies suggest that these relationships are a protecting influence on students' feelings toward their schools and associated risky behavior (Chapman, Buckley, Sheehan, Shochet & Romaniuk, 2011). Moreover, findings suggest an increase in such connectedness will produce a surge in both physical and emotional

well-being in the general student population. Thus, increasing student involvement and relations has proven to yield less violent behavior and at-risk tendencies. Chapman and colleagues (2011) conclude by suggesting the implementation of school preventative strategies, which stress the involvement of students, that will yield less risky behavior in tandem with correlated injuries.

Overall, there are present assertions that address the precursors for violence in schools. The literature presents multiple strata for what causes young men to employ actions akin to school rampages. Furthermore, there is stout evidence that implies correlations in mass school shootings between bullying, devaluing masculinity, and dominance. When looking at these situations, it is important to examine the media and what it may be conveying, whether it is coverage of a school shooting or a character on television portraying a vengeance-driven personality. The evidence highlights media's potential to have a contagion effect on malleable and angry minds. Given that there are findings that correlate school environment to violence, it is important to consider the connectedness students feel with their schools. The prior content is consistent with the importance of a relationship between students, their school, and the progressive results that are reaped when such suggestions are considered.

Policy Implications

Given that there are multiple layers for how and why individuals commit school shootings, it is imperative to establish guidelines and suggestive adaptations to this problem. Sprague and colleagues (2001) expand on the significance of school connectedness and precursors to violence; their cost-effective implementation of interventions between school staff and students exhibiting at-risk behavior had a positive impact. In addition, the intervention program consisted of Effective Behavioral Support

(EBS) and criteria for violence prevention. These practices were tailored to address the entire student body, accompany teachers in class settings, and include working and proficient punitive measures. Further, these policies consisted of social capabilities training, restructuring scholastic courses, school-affiliated intervention techniques, screening for children with anti-social and at-risk mannerisms, and emphasized positive reinforcement when correcting student error (Sprague et al., 2001). Following the application of both support systems, the findings suggested students with at-risk behavior had a decrease in disciplinary referral rates, an increase in social skills, and an increase in academic accomplishment. In contention with these findings, Sprague and colleagues (2001) acknowledge the limitations: the fact that these results were only applicable to smaller schools, small sample sizes, and the short length of the study. Since there is a lack of funding, this study could not maintain itself for an extended period of time (Sprague et al., 2001). Even though there are limitations to this study, it provides a strong connection between school interventions and a positive student body. Not only was the study capable of developing good policy in screening at-risk behavior in youth, but it produced positive data for the assessment and support of the student populace.

The EBS and preventative violence implication, in some interpretations, address the major factors earlier referenced in this paper. It can embrace bullying, devaluing masculinity, and other precursors in school violence and shootings. Hypothetically speaking, if this policy were to be awarded additional study time, funding, and freedoms, it can further produce improved strategies for creating a happier and tighter-knit student body. One such possibility could include positive correctional practices for bullies who are confirmed to exhibit physical or homophobic harassment

toward other frail and different students. Also, since there is a screening process implemented from the previous study, those who are identified to potentially engage in at-risk or anti-social behavior should be required by the school to participate in a club or interactive group. This strategy is specifically to unify the student community as well as boost the social confidence in anti-social student populations. Since Sprague and colleagues (2001) suggest further school interventions and support as a means to a positive student body, it may be wise to include school therapists who interview each student and examine their mental health status. Implementing further strategies that allow students to talk about what may be troubling them, may result in better mental and emotional health, especially if they are victims of bullying or physical harassment.

Even though prior implications suggest further school intervention as a preventative measure, one intervention that has shown no existence thus far is school security. A big question that comes to mind when thinking about school shootings considers if a school shooter does not attend the school they attack? For instance, Nikolas Cruz, the Stoneman Douglas High School shooter, did not attend the school he shot up, though he was as student in years prior, so he had knowledge of the school and what security or opposing factors he would face. Since security was practically nonexistent and ineffective during this shooting, applying some form of physical resistance to outside forces is worthy of consideration. Shapiro (2018) explains his own experience of attending a Jewish high school in Los Angeles that was protected by armed guards. He expands by stating that, on average, there were at least two bomb threats annually made against his campus. In addition, his school was scoped out by white supremacist Buford Furrow who shot up a Jewish

community center in 1999. Shapiro (2018) concludes by emphasizing the impact armed security has on deterring shootings and acts of terror. By implementing methods employed by schools in Israel, there would be mimicked results at schools in America (Shapiro, 2018). In other words, if there is any form of resistance, whether it be fences or armed security at schools, then it will deter aggressors from pursuing their motives. Counterarguments to this idea suggest proponents for armed security in schools want to make schools into prisons. What opponents fail to understand is that prisons aim to keep criminals in, whereas security aims to keep criminals out. Essentially, this counterargument implies armed security will prompt students to not feel welcome and will not keep them safe. Studies show, in comparison to private schools with armed security, students who attend public school are twice as likely to be physically attacked by another student and share the same probability of becoming a victim of violent crime on campus (RAC, 2018). Therefore, it is safe to conclude that private schools who employ armed personnel are implementing proper strategies to protect the students' safety and, with proper funding, public schools would yield the same results.

Conclusion

When considering precursors in school shootings, one must understand there is not one cause or indicator, but there are several. The catalysts range from persistent bullying, to inspiration from media, and even a lack of connection to school environment. Implications have been made which prompt the success of both school intervention policies and armed personnel. If future considerations are not made, then the security of the American student will never be guaranteed and school shootings will continue to be a stereotype in American culture.

References

- Agnich, L. E. (2015). A comparative analysis of attempted and completed school-based mass murder attacks. *American Journal of Criminal Justice, 40*(1), 1-22.
- Chapman, R. L., Buckley, L., Sheehan, M. C., Shochet, I. M., & Romaniuk, M. (2011). The impact of school connectedness on violent behavior, transport risk-taking behavior, and associated injuries in adolescence. *Journal of School Psychology, 49*(4), 399-410.
- De Venanzi, A. (2012). School shootings in the USA: Popular culture as risk, teen marginality, and violence against peers. *Crime, Media, Culture: An International Journal, 8*(3), 261-278.
- Gius, M. (2014). The impact of state and federal assault weapons bans on public mass shootings. *Applied Economics Letters, 22*(4), 1-4.
- Kimmel, M. (1994). Masculinity as homophobia: Fear, shame and silence in the construction of gender identity. In H. Brod & M. Kaufman (Eds.), *Theorizing masculinities* (pp. 119-141). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Kimmel, M. S., & Mahler, M. (2003). Adolescent masculinity, homophobia, and violence: Random school shootings, 1982-2001. *The American Behavioral Scientist, 46*(10), 1439-1458.
- Kleck, G. (2009). Mass shootings in schools. *The American Behavioral Scientist., 52*(10), 1447-1464.
- Klein, J. (2006). Sexuality and school shootings. *Journal of Homosexuality, 51*(4), 39-62.
- Langman, P. (2009). Rampage school shooters: A typology. *Aggression and Violent Behavior, 14*(1), 79-86.

- Lankford, A., Madfis, E., & Dahmen, N. S. (2018). Visually reporting mass shootings: U.S. newspaper photographic coverage of three mass school shootings. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 62(2), 163-180.
- Larkin, R. (2009). The Columbine legacy. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 52(9), 1309-1326.
- Lawrence, R., & Mueller, D. (2003). School shootings and the man-bites-dog criterion of newsworthiness. *Youth Violence and Juvenile Justice*, 1(4), 330-345.
- Maguire, B., Weatherby, G. A., & Mathers, R. A. (2002). Network news coverage of school shootings. *The Social Science Journal*, 39(3), 465-470.
- Richmond Alarm Companies. (2018, January 23). Are private schools statistically safer than public schools? Retrieved from <https://info.richmondalarm.com/news/are-private-schools-statistically-safer-than-public-schools>
- Schwartz, G. (2008) You talking to me? De Niro's interrogative fidelity and subversion of masculine norms. *Journal of Popular Culture* 41: 443–466.
- Shapiro, B. (2018, February 15). So, what the hell do we do now? Retrieved from <https://www.dailywire.com/news/27184/so-what-hell-do-we-do-now-ben-shapiro>
- Sprague, J., Walker, H., Golly, A., White, K., Myers, D. R., & Tad, S. (2001). Translating research into effective practice: The effects of a universal staff and student intervention on indicators of discipline and school safety. *Education and Treatment of Children*, 24(4), 495-511.
- Statista. (2018). [Graph illustration the number of victims of school shootings in the US February 14, 2018]. *Number*

of victims of school shootings in the United States between 1982 and February 2018. Retrieved from <https://www.statista.com/statistics/476381/school-shootings-in-the-us-by-victim-count/>

Volungis, A. (2016). School size and youth violence: The mediating role of school connectedness. *North American Journal of Psychology*, 18(1), 123-146.

Branden Harrington graduated with his bachelor's degree in Justice Studies from San Jose State University in 2018. He plans to attend law school at University of Nevada Las Vegas starting in 2020. He is interested in Medical Malpractice and Intellectual Property and aspires to work in contracts and negotiation. Meanwhile, he works full-time in fraud detection analytics for a federal bank. When Branden is not working, preparing for law school, or with his family, he can be found coaching from the couch while watching the San Jose Sharks.