

School Shootings: Five Misconceptions and What District Leaders Should Do



Leadership for Educational
Achievement Foundation, Inc.

LEAD • EDUCATE • ACHIEVE



LEAF SUBSCRIPTION FOR
PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

Suggested Steps for Collaboratively Reading This Article

We encourage district and school leaders to read this article with colleagues and discuss it in collaborative settings. Below are suggested activities that can be used by individuals or groups to actively engage with the article's content.

Before Reading

Take a few moments to consider the following pre-reading prompts. Record your responses so that you can revisit them after reading. If you are part of a group that will be reading this article, share and discuss your responses before beginning to read.

1. Scan the article's section headers in order to begin considering the five misconceptions. How prevalent are these misconceptions in your workplace?
2. Does your district have a threat assessment team and process? If so, what do the district's policies and procedures look like?

During Reading

Identify and highlight information, ideas, or activities that:

1. Are *new* to you.
2. *Align* with your current understanding.
3. *Differ* from your current understanding.

After Reading

With your colleagues, consider and discuss your responses to the following questions:

1. How did the article's information, ideas, and activities align with or challenge your prior understanding?
2. Based on your reading, what actions or steps can you take moving forward, particularly as they relate to your school's or district's threat assessment plans? How might the following potential action steps in particular be helpful, or not, in your context?
 - a. Schedule a study session with your school board (possibly with representatives from local police and social service agencies as well) to discuss your district's current plans for dealing with threats and/or a school shooting incident.
 - b. Schedule a working session with the district's principals, assistant principals, and counselors to discuss the article and each school's plans to help keep students safe and, if necessary, plans for reacting to a shooting incident.

School Shootings: Five Misconceptions and What District Leaders Should Do

One of the most important responsibilities of district superintendents and other education leaders is to do everything possible to ensure the safety of students and staff. Mass shooting incidents, particularly those during 2018 in Parkland, Florida, and Santa Fe, Texas, have elevated concerns about school safety. After such tragedies, superintendents, boards, and district staff often question their own plans to keep schools free of violence and wonder whether they might have missed anything when preparing those plans. Recent surveys indicate that roughly a third of all parents are now afraid for their children's safety at school, a level not seen since the late 1990s, after the Columbine High School massacre and other shootings in rural and suburban towns like Jonesboro, Arkansas, and Paducah, Kentucky (Richmond, 2018). The widespread concern has led district leaders to consider what else they can do to alleviate fears and keep their students and staff members safe.

As school shootings receive extensive media coverage and generate such high levels of concern about school safety, there is also a lot of misinformation about the perpetrators, their attacks, and what schools and communities can do to prevent these events. In the interest of better informing district superintendents in New York and their cabinet officials, this article takes a look at five common misconceptions about school shootings and their perpetrators. The article draws extensively from a brief developed by WestEd's Justice and Prevention Research Center (Langman, Petrosino, & Persson, 2018) and describes misconceptions that the first author, in particular, has focused on addressing during his work training educators about school safety. The article's conclusion provides a few

evidence-based recommendations for district leaders to consider.

Misconception #1: All School Shooters Fit a Consistent Pattern

Many well-meaning people have tried to find a "profile" of a typical shooter so that anyone fitting this description can be identified and stopped before going through with an attack. This perspective makes it possible to talk about shooters as if they all belong to one group. But any serious inquiry into who commits school shootings, and why, soon reveals considerable diversity among the perpetrators, their motivations, and the natures of their attacks (Langman, 2015, 2016). A report by the U.S. Secret Service and the U.S. Department of Education following the 1999 Columbine massacre concluded that "there is no accurate or useful 'profile' of students who engaged in targeted school violence" (Vossekuil, Fein, Reddy, Borum, & Modzeleski, 2002).

Research has shown that school shooters range in age from 11 to 62, with more racial, ethnic, and gender diversity than is often recognized (Langman, 2015, 2016). In addition, the attacks themselves vary significantly. Some are targeted against specific individuals, while others are random attacks against anyone in the vicinity. Also, there are differences in the relationships between perpetrators and the schools they attack. Most perpetrators are current students at the schools they attack, but others attack schools that they attended years before, and still others commit attacks against schools

with which they had no previous connection. The motivations behind these different types of attacks should not be assumed to be the same.

Misconception #2: School Shooters Are Bullied Loners

Related to the first misconception is the belief that school shooters are bullied loners who reach a breaking point and attack a school in revenge. Although research does indicate bullying in the background of many school shooters (Vossekuil et al., 2002), some commentators unfortunately have focused on bullying as a *primary cause* of school shootings. But research by Langman (2015), for example, has found that many of the shooters were not bullied, and those who were bullied rarely aimed the attacks at the particular students who had picked on them (Langman, 2017). These findings raise questions about the significance of bullying as a motivation for the attacks. The people who have been most commonly targeted by shooters were school administrators who had disciplined them, teachers who had failed them, or fellow students who had rejected their friendship or romantic interests.

Not only are many shooters not the victims of bullying, but many (if not most) are not loners or detached misfits. School shooters often have friends and have dated. They sometimes have played school sports and have been involved in other school or community activities. One had even been voted Homecoming Prince. Some adult shooters have married and had children.

Addressing bullying and reaching out to youth to reduce loneliness and establish positive relationships are critical for all sorts of reasons (Petrosino, Guckenbur, DeVoe, & Hanson, 2010), and in some cases, being bullied and experiencing loneliness or disconnection from the school community are part of the complex set of factors in school shooters' developmental pathways to violence. Nonetheless, data about shooters do not support the likelihood that bullying prevention or relationship-building efforts alone will eliminate school shootings.

Misconception #3: School Shooters Are Mentally Ill

Whereas the misconception about the bullied loner focuses on the role of the school environment, there is a different misconception that focuses on the individual: the shooter always is a victim of mental illness. This misconception centers on a term — mental illness — that is vague and can mean many different things to different people. If mental illness means being psychotic or insane (the latter is a legal term, not a psychological one), then many shooters were not mentally ill, and most have not been found to be legally insane.

Nonetheless, people who commit mass murder, including those who commit school shootings, are clearly not psychologically healthy. The ways in which they are psychologically distressed, however, vary. There is no single psychological profile that fits all school shooters, although they tend to fall into one of three categories (Langman, 2009): psychopathic (narcissistic and lacking empathy for others), psychotic (having experienced one or more symptoms of psychosis, such as

hallucinations and/or delusions), or traumatized (from severely dysfunctional and violent families).

This typology can provide a useful framework to classify school shooting perpetrators, but it does not, by itself, explain school shootings. Most people in these three categories or who are mentally ill, for example, do *not* commit mass murders (see, e.g., Vintiadis, 2018). School shootings are complex phenomena that can best be understood as involving many personal, social, and familial factors that come together to put someone on a pathway to violence.

Misconception #4: Training Schools in Active-Shooter Response Is Sufficient

In the wake of Columbine and subsequent attacks, schools across the country have implemented a variety of emergency response protocols, such as lockdown procedures and training in how to survive an attack (e.g., “Run, Hide, Fight”). These trainings and procedures are important and can save lives, but they are not the only thing that schools can do, and crisis-response procedures do not prevent school shootings. These are emergency responses that are activated after there is already a gunman in the building. Although complete elimination of any chance of a school attack may never be possible, there are evidence-based strategies that can be employed to reduce the probability of attacks occurring in the first place.

Research underscores the importance of utilizing *threat assessment* to identify potential shooters before they show up at a school armed and ready

to kill. Although there is no single consistent demographic or other profile of school shooters, a common characteristic, in almost every case, is that the individual has exhibited some threatening behavior beforehand. For example, the person may have confided to a classmate about a plan to attack the school, or may have posted something about the plan on social media. Effective threat assessment involves a careful protocol implemented by a multidisciplinary team to examine that threat and deal with it (Meloy & Hoffman, 2014; Fein et al., 2002). If schools have personnel trained in threat assessment, they can investigate safety concerns that are brought to their attention by students, staff, parents, or other community members.

The purposes of threat assessment are to differentiate false alarms from real threats and to provide appropriate interventions when threats are determined to be real, so as to maintain safety. What distinguishes real threats is the presence of any evidence that the person in question has taken steps to prepare for committing an attack. In contrast, many students make threats or comments that they do not mean, and because they do not mean their threats literally, they do not take steps to carry them out.

Threat assessment is the proactive part of school safety, with crisis response being the reactive part. Both are essential. If a real threat has been identified, the appropriate interventions depend on the details of the particular situation but can include mental health services, such as inpatient hospitalization, residential treatment, or outpatient evaluation and counseling, as well as involving law enforcement to conduct a search of the person's home and/or to place the person in a detention facility.

Misconception #5: School Shootings Happen “Out of the Blue” and Cannot Be Predicted

It is often said that school violence cannot be predicted, but it is not unusual for school and district personnel to have information that suggests that a particular student might pose a risk of violence. For example, if a student makes a threat via social media or to a peer, talks to friends about “pulling a Columbine,” has tried to recruit a peer to help out, and has obtained the weapons needed, it is entirely reasonable to predict a high likelihood of the student committing an act of violence.

Threat assessment is critical in making sure that violent intentions do not become reality, but it requires knowing about the threat. In many cases, school shooters have left a trail of red flags that were ignored — somebody knew something about the perpetrator’s violent intentions. Establishing a mechanism for making any credible threats known and educating school and community members about warning signs are essential to threat assessment’s effectiveness.

Warning signs can take many forms. They can include the perpetrator inviting a peer to join the attack, warning friends to stay away so that they do not get harmed during the attack, bragging about what they are going to do, showing off the weapons they plan to use, or simply declaring their intention to commit an attack or stating that they are going to kill a particular person.

In addition to understanding the importance of threat assessment,

schools also need to create safe spaces for students to come forward to report a threat, as students are often the ones who know about a threat by a current or former classmate (Fein et al., 2002).

Conclusion

Keeping schools safe means moving beyond the sound bites, stereotypes, and misconceptions that are often reported in the media and elsewhere. To inform efforts to address the issue, research has identified a wealth of information about school shooters, their motivations, and their pre-attack behaviors. The next step is to put this knowledge to use to protect students and staff by identifying potential perpetrators before they come on campus with a gun — and getting them the help they need.

So, what specifically can district leaders and school boards do?

- » If the district or a particular school within the district does not already have a threat assessment team and process, such a team and process should be established, which includes creating policies, procedures, forms, and a database or system for tracking concerns (see <https://schoolshooters.info/prevention> and National Threat Assessment Center, 2018).
- » All employees should be trained on warning signs and the process of reporting safety concerns.
- » All students should receive training on warning signs and the reporting of safety concerns, and schools should establish safe spaces and multiple ways (including anonymous ones) for students to be able to report potential threats.
- » A threat assessment team should be multidisciplinary and should

be trained to have knowledge of perpetrators, warning signs, and the mechanics of investigating concerns.

- Any investigation that the team carries out should go beyond just talking with the student who has been making the threat; it should also include talking with peers, school staff, and parents, and examining the student’s computer use.
- An investigation should not be considered as something that is done once and then is over (“one and done”); if there is enough concern about a potential school shooting to warrant an investigation, then the situation should be continuously monitored.
- School leaders should not over-interpret the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) such that essential communication does not occur; when student safety is at stake, FERPA does allow some communication about information that would otherwise be considered private.

References

- Fein, R. A., Vossekuil, B., Pollack, W. S., Borum, R., Modzeleski, W., & Reddy, M. (2002). *Threat assessment in schools: A guide to managing threatening situations and creating safe school climates*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, Safe and Drug-Free Schools Program, and U.S. Secret Service, National Threat Assessment Center.
- Langman, P. (2009). *Why kids kill: Inside the minds of school shooters*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.

Langman, P. (2015). *School shooters: Understanding high school, college, and adult perpetrators*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.

Langman, P. (2016). Multi-victim school shootings in the United States: A fifty-year review. *Journal of Campus Behavioral Intervention*, 4, 5–17.

Langman, P. (2017). *Intended and targeted victims* (Version 2.18) [Online database]. Langman Psychological Associates. Retrieved from <https://schoolshooters.info/information/general-research>

Langman, P., Petrosino, A., & Persson, H. (2018). *Five misconceptions about school shootings*. San Francisco, CA: Justice & Prevention Research Center at WestEd. Retrieved from <https://www.wested.org/resources/five-misconceptions-about-school-shootings/>

Meloy, J. R., & Hoffman, J. (Eds.). (2014). *International handbook of threat assessment*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

National Threat Assessment Center. (2018). *Enhancing school safety using a*

threat assessment model: An operational guide for preventing targeted school violence. Washington, DC: U.S. Secret Service and U.S. Department of Homeland Security. Retrieved from https://www.secretservice.gov/data/protection/ntac/USSS_NTAC_Enhancing_School_Safety_Guide_7.11.18.pdf

Petrosino, A., Guckenburg, S., DeVoe, J., & Hanson, T. (2010). *What characteristics of bullying, bullying victims, and schools are associated with increased reporting of bullying to school officials?* (Issues & Answers Report, REL 2010–No. 092). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance, Regional Educational Laboratory Northeast and Islands. Retrieved from https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/regions/northeast/pdf/REL_2010092.pdf

Richmond, E. (2018, July 18). Parents fear for kids' safety in schools reaches two-decade high. *U.S. News & World Report*. Retrieved from <https://www.usnews.com/news/education-news/articles/2018-07-17/parents-fear-for-kids-safety-in-schools-reaches-two-decade-high>

Vintiadis, E. (2018, February 18). Mass shooting and the myth of the violent mentally ill. *Psychology Today*. Retrieved from <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/minding-the-mind/201802/mass-shooting-and-the-myth-the-violent-mentally-ill>

Vossekuil, B., Fein, R. A., Reddy, M., Borum, R., & Modzeleski, W. (2002). *The final report and findings of the Safe School Initiative: Implications for the prevention of school attacks in the United States*. Washington, DC: U.S. Secret Service and U.S. Department of Education.

Acknowledgments

The content in this issue of the *LEAF Subscription for Professional Learning* was developed and authored by Peter Langman (a clinical psychologist and national expert on school shooters) and WestEd's Anthony Petrosino (Director of the Justice & Prevention Research Center and Associate Director of the Health & Justice Program), Hannah Persson (Research Assistant in the Justice & Prevention Research Center), and Paul Koehler (Director of the Policy Center and the West Comprehensive Center). For more information, contact Kevin Perks at kperks@WestEd.org or 781.481.1110.

The content of this article is adapted from *Five Misconceptions About School Shootings*, originally published by WestEd in August 2018, and written by Peter Langman, Anthony Petrosino, and Hannah Persson. Available at <https://www.wested.org/resources/five-misconceptions-about-school-shootings/>

About the publisher

LEAF, Inc., provides high-quality professional learning to support superintendent development and the development of school district leadership team members across New York. Launched in 2012, the subscription service is intended to provide a convenient and cost-effective format for professional learning.

For more information, call LEAF, Inc., at 518.449.1063.

WestEd is a nonpartisan, nonprofit research, development, and service agency that works at the national, state, and local levels to improve education and other important outcomes for children, youth, and adults.

Copyright 2018 WestEd.

