School Shootings: Five Misconceptions and What District Leaders Should Do

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.
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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 nature 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 (Vossekui 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 losers 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, Guckenburg, 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


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