Addressing School Violence

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Incidents, such as the recent ones at Columbine, Virginia Tech, and Northern Illinois University, produce horrifying, enduring images. Members of the mass media publicize and inadvertently glorify these events to capture the attention of viewers and readers. Unfortunately, many of the portrayals have led to faulty assumptions and stereotypes of the school violence perpetrator.

Further, researchers have devoted much attention to generating a working profile of these offenders and describing many typical characteristics.

However, it is important to caution against the use of a profile because many apparent warning signs may be irrelevant and restrictive and even could unfairly categorize a student who may not pose danger.[1] Therefore, an awareness of the potential warning signs empirically based in making accurate threat assessments in the school setting proves critical.

CURRENT STATISTICS

Homicides in schools have decreased since 1994 despite periods of copycat shootings during the late 1990s and 2007 to 2008.[2] However, simple and aggravated assaults, as well as drug/narcotic and weapon violations, increased between 2000 and 2004.[3] Bullying remains one of the largest problems in schools, with the percentage of students reportedly bullied at least once per week steadily increasing since 1999.[4] According to the FBI's Uniform Crime Reporting Program, school offenders typically are Caucasian males between the ages of 13 and 18. However, the number of girls involved in school crime has increased from over 12,000 incidents in 2000 to approximately 25,000 occurrences in 2005.[5] This included crimes ranging from those against property and society (e.g., criminal mischief, burglary, and drug/narcotic violations) to offenses against persons (e.g., assault, manslaughter, and murder).

WARNING SIGNS

Many factors can contribute to the development of a violent school offender. These include family, school, and social dynamics, as well as the personality of the child.[6]

Family Dynamics

Family dynamics include the thinking, traditions, beliefs, and behavior patterns within the home. These play a vital role in the social development of a young child. It is important to question how these dynamics affect and are perceived by the student.[7] For example, an

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abusive marriage or a particularly hostile divorce can have damaging effects on children. An adolescent who lives in a chaotic and neglectful home environment may develop poor coping and social skills and behavior problems primarily due to exposure to violence and inadequate parenting.[8] Not surprisingly, research has shown that in terms of the child's long-term social and emotional development, having one nurturing, attentive, and caring parent is better than two in a relationship characterized by discord or abuse.[9]

Although negative family dynamics play a role in the development of violent tendencies, many high-profile cases of school violence seem to have involved children from a positive home environment. For instance, Kip Kinkel, an individual who murdered both of his parents before killing two students and wounding 25 others in Oregon, appeared to come from an ideal family (two parents, upper-middle-class home, successful older sibling). However, a closer examination revealed a highly critical father and a child who perceived himself as inadequate, was physically awkward, and had a fascination with guns and bombs. In fact, to support Kip's interest, his father bought him firearms.

Four Main Areas of Examination

1) Family Dynamics: Family's thinking, traditions, beliefs, and patterns of behavior
2) School Dynamics: Schools's customs, beliefs, and behavioral patterns (e.g., bullying, treatment of students, some individuals receiving more/less attention, school activities)
3) Social Dynamics: Student's beliefs and attitudes toward drugs, friends, weapons, entertainment, and other activities (e.g., violent video games)
4) Characteristics/Personality: Leakage, depression, verbal expressions, bizarre actions, thoughts/obsessions, and physical behaviors

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Several of the larger, more publicized school shootings took place in middle-class neighborhoods. People have raised many questions as to why these homicides occur in such areas. Experts have suggested that overly permissive or uninvolved parents of these children bear some responsibility.[10]

School Dynamics

School dynamics are the customs, beliefs, and patterns of behavior that comprise the campus culture.[11] A student's role in these dynamics offers insight into the individual's behavior and self-perception. Knowing a school's dynamics sheds light on what students value, which adolescents more likely will gain approval or be bullied, and which receive attention from authorities.[12] Bullying is a major factor and has a strong impact on a child or adolescent. In a study of 15 school shootings between 1995 and 2001, rejection (e.g., bullying, ostracism, and romantic rejection) contributed to the violent behavior.[13] Peer victimization and poor quality of interpersonal and romantic relationships can contribute to student depression.[14] Once these individuals feel rejected, they may begin to identify with others who feel socially shunned or who belong to a deviant peer group. This may contribute to the proliferation and acceptance of violence.[15]

Cyber bullying also is on the rise, with students engaging in verbally aggressive behavior

Personality Characteristics and Behaviors

- Leakage: boasts, predictions, and subtle threats; stories, essays, poems, and pictures; violent fantasies; and interest in violent video games, movies, and books
- Depression, anger, impulsive and uncontrollable behavior
- Poor coping skills
- Low frustration tolerance
- Grudges, lack of resiliency
- "Us against them" mentality, narcissism
- Boastfulness about weapons, abusive language
- Suicidal ideation, wishes of death, desire to kill others
- Delusions, hallucinations, bizarre thoughts
- History of physical assault
- Perpetrator or victim of bullying
- Substance abuse
- Rebellion against authority
- Isolated, withdrawn
- Fatigue

on social networking sites, such as MySpace and Facebook, and instant-messenger services.[16] Adolescents are extremely sensitive to rejection and the opinions of peers, both of which can serve as catalysts for revenge. Any bullying should be seriously assessed as it can be indicative of more serious problems, such as fighting and weapon carrying.[17]

Social Dynamics

Social dynamics of the community provide information on a child's preferred lifestyle. They also influence attitudes and beliefs toward drugs, friends, weapons, and entertainment.[18] The diaries of the Columbine shooters, Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris, suggest addictive behavior with first-person-shooter video games.[19] Although the level of their influence is controversial, violent video games can have a detrimental impact on vulnerable adolescents and even college-age students. For example, one study found that girls often will become more verbally aggressive after exposure to violent video games.[20] While this does not mean that playing such games leads to homicidal acts, doing so can serve as a facilitator for impressionable adolescents who may not see any other outlet for their psychological pain.

Personality Characteristics

The personality of the student proves critical in assessing the potential for violence. Certain traits of a child or adolescent raise concern. In particular, individuals who eventually commit school homicides exhibit behavior "leakage."[21] This refers to a student's intentional or unintentional disclosure of thoughts, fantasies, feelings, and possible intentions. Examples include boasts, predictions, subtle threats, stories, essays, poems, and drawings. Leakage also can take the form of a fascination with violence and violent entertainment (e.g., video games and movies). It appears that nearly 50 percent of school homicide perpetrators exhibit some type of warning sign, including leaving notes or making a verbal threat.[22]

A student also may show signs of depression, often manifested in adolescents by anger and irritability. Additionally, the individual could display low frustration tolerance, poor coping skills, and a lack of resiliency when faced with stressful situations or conflicts (e.g., end of a romantic relationship). This becomes compounded by bullying at school or hostility at home. Consequently, the student may blame others, demonstrate a lack of empathy, and exhibit an exaggerated sense of entitlement. An "us against them" mentality reflects the latter. The individual even may criticize previous school shooters for their failures (e.g., not getting a high enough body count).[23]

Intrapersonal Variables

An examination of intrapersonal variables includes verbal communication, thoughts, and behaviors.[24] These tend to be more salient, easier to observe, and often deemed leakage prior to more offensive and violent behavior.

Verbal Communication

Verbal warning signs include a student's oral and written communication.[25] A common misconception holds that violent people just "snap." In fact, in over 75 percent of school shooting incidents, students knew beforehand about the troubled adolescent and the

planned event.[26] This is because the shooter may make direct threats, brag about bringing weapons to school, use abusive language, or verbalize a wish to kill others and even to be killed.

Cognitions

The student may exhibit bizarre thoughts, such as delusions, hallucinations, paranoia, or other disrupted mental processes. Further, the individual

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may write with profanity and abusive language, which tends to be extreme and contextually inappropriate; this suggests a deteriorating mental capacity and a deficiency of emotional control.

Eric Harris and Seung-Hui Cho, the Virginia Tech perpetrator, serve as good examples of this behavior. Their disjointed and violent rants were both written and oral. Such bizarre thoughts (as determined by

individuals' verbalizations), may indicate a serious mental health condition, especially because schizophrenia and other major psychiatric disorders have their initial onset in the late teens and early 20s. Thoughts of suicide or dying in the process of their planned actions often accompany violent adolescents.

Behaviors

Behavioral and physical warning signs indicative of a violent student include a prior history of physical assault, being both a bully and a victim of bullying, and possession of weapons and violent literature. The individual also may have a history of substance use, rebelliousness against authority, and socially isolated and withdrawn behavior.[27] The latter may point to depression, often manifested as irritability and anger in children and youths.

EFFECTIVE MEASURES

Threat Assessment

Threat assessment in the campus setting involves law enforcement and school officials working collaboratively to determine risk.[28] It consists of evaluating a threat, reaching a conclusion regarding threat level, and determining an effective response.[29] This approach, developed by the U.S. Secret Service, is based on six key principles.

1) Violence is not unpredictable or spontaneous; therefore, information about the student, as well as the pupil's behavior, can prevent violence.

2) Information should include knowledge about the student, environment, specific situation, and target of the violence.

3) All information should be verifiable and reliable.

4) Authorities should leave out assumptions or subjective impressions about the student's personality or other characteristics and instead base evaluations on facts and observable behaviors. The warning signs should be used more as guidelines than absolutes.

5) Multiple sources of information (e.g., other students, teachers, faculty, and parents) should be obtained.

6) Conclusions should support the facts as to whether the student poses a threat, not necessarily whether the individual made a threat. Also, assessments should include considerations of whether the subject has the means and intent to carry it out.[30]

Prevention Programs

School resource officer (SRO) programs serve an integral role in threat assessment.[31] In times of crisis, having an SRO based in the school decreases response time and increases student and staff perceptions of safety.[32] The SRO also can educate students about the

consequences of their behavior and identify peer conflicts.[33] The value of SROs further can be enhanced by their heightened awareness of warning signs and cues relevant in accurate threat assessment.

Over the past several years, police agencies have established a positive working relationship with school districts and students through SRO and Drug Abuse Resistance Education (DARE) programs. Law enforcement officers can contribute to violence prevention in several ways. First, they must have an ongoing collaboration with teachers and administrators. Second, they must be capable of conducting their own assessments of bullying and related problems in their schools. Third, law enforcement personnel in schools should become well acquainted with students and staff and make themselves accessible for reporting of information; an anonymous reporting system is advisable to encourage students to come forward with important tips.[34]

The National School Safety Center has offered suggestions for decreasing campus violence and strengthening the relationship between law enforcement and school districts. For example, an understanding and written agreement should exist about how the school and police agency will work together to promote violence prevention

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CASE EXAMPLE

The case of Kip Kinkel demonstrates a family life that appeared pleasant and nurturing.[35] However, other warning signs indicate a bullied and troubled child who had difficulties in academics, feelings of alienation, arrest and psychiatric histories, and suicidal tendencies.

Kip Kinkel was born in 1982. His parents both taught Spanish, his father at a community college and his mother at a local high school. Kip's older sister by approximately 6 years excelled in both academics and athletics.

His family moved to Spain for 1 year when Kip was 6 years old. He attended a non-English speaking school and had difficulty adapting; however, his sister performed well. During his schooling in Spain, Kip frequently faced bullying and felt alienated. When the family returned to the United States, Kip's teachers noticed that he was developmentally immature and behind in school. As a result, he repeated first grade. In fourth grade, he was diagnosed with dyslexia.

Kip showed an interest in explosives and firearms in the seventh grade, when he purchased books on how to build a bomb. In eighth grade, he was arrested for shoplifting and suspended for kicking another student. As a result, he was referred for a psychological evaluation, diagnosed with depression, and placed on antidepressant medication. During his court-ordered psychiatric treatment, authorities considered Kip to have early onset schizophrenia, but he initially denied any thought disorder (e.g., hallucinations, delusions). In fact, months before the shooting, his sister reported a pleasant family vacation. However, in 1998, he exploded in an English class, screaming, "Damn these voices in my head." He stated that in sixth grade he began hearing them tell him that he was not worth anything. Kip also was noted to have strange delusions, including ideas that the Chinese planned to invade America, Disney would take over the world, and that microchips were planted in his head. He also made several morbid and cryptic drawings, including one that stated, "Killers start sad and crazy."

He received psychiatric treatment until approximately July 1997 and maintained his antidepressant regimen. During that time, without his parents knowledge, he bought his first sawed-off shotgun from a friend. However, his father bought him a 9-millimeter Glock and, later, a .22-caliber semiautomatic rifle. It is speculated that his parents were concerned about his interest, but wanted to educate him about gun safety. In an interview, Kip's sister indicated that his parents had tried everything to help him. He expressed to his family his interest in how bombs and guns work, as well as his desire to enter law enforcement after college. In fact, Kip's sister noted that violence did not occur in the family; rather, she perceived a positive family environment. However, Kip's feelings of inadequacy were apparent.

Later that fall, Kip's psychiatrist discontinued his antidepressant medication. During this time, Kip made a speech in class about how to make a bomb. Throughout the school year of 1997 to 1998, several school shootings occurred in the nation, including those in Pearl, Mississippi; West Paducah, Kentucky; and Jonesboro, Arkansas. In May 1998, Kip, at age 15, arranged to buy a .32-caliber pistol from a friend. When the friend's father reported it missing, Kip was expelled for bringing it to school. His father picked him up from the police station; reports indicated that Kip was upset for disappointing his parents. In her interview, his sister stated that disappointing their parents was the biggest offense in the family. That afternoon and early evening, Kip killed both of his parents. The next day, he dressed in a trench coat, carried three guns, and taped a hunting knife to his leg. He shot 27 students; 2 died, and 25 were injured. Some students tackled him and held him down until police arrived. Once in police custody, he charged an officer with the knife and shouted that he wanted to be killed. In his confession, Kip exclaimed that he was hearing voices and once again shouted, "Damn these voices in my head."

and respond to crises. An Officer Friendly program can be established whereby SROs provide instruction on a variety of topics, such as drug abuse, juvenile justice, and child safety. Students can be encouraged to go on ride-alongs with officers, and a Big Brother/Big Sister program also can be implemented, pairing students with law enforcement personnel. The Police Athletic League historically has had success in forging such relationships as well. These strategies will increase the cohesiveness between police officers and students and facilitate communication and information flow between the two.[36] The International Association of Campus Law Enforcement Administrators and the National Association of School Safety and Law Enforcement Officers provide information on how officers should become involved and respond to threats and crises and collaborate with local school districts.

School Safety Plan

Each school should have a safety plan. Law enforcement must have an active role in the plan's development and implementation. The plan should outline prevention programs, including the SRO's role within the school community, and bullying prevention programs. Further, it should indicate that

a threat assessment team (TAT) will form and activate upon determination of a threat. If the threat has been assessed as real and imminent, steps in formulating a response must be outlined. Each school must have an established policy of contingency management that includes detention, suspension, and expulsion.

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Authorities should make parents aware of initiatives to prevent violence and the intervention plan upon identifying a threat. Officials also must notify parents when someone has been threatened, keeping in mind privacy and defamation-of-character laws.[37] Also, search-and-seizure laws must be considered when assessing a threat. Authorities should conduct interviews with the individual who made the threat, as well as any witnesses and potential targets. The TAT should

convene to discuss the results of the interview, determine whether a threat is imminent and formulate a response plan if necessary.[38] Mental health officials should be consulted in cases when hospitalization due to a possible psychiatric disorder (e.g., depression, suicide, psychosis) is required.[39]

CONCLUSION

Despite the decline in the rates of homicides committed by adolescents over the past decade, the potential for violent behavior among students remains. However, school and law enforcement officials can work together to reduce the threat of such violence.

Understanding the warning signs—including family, school, and social dynamics, as well as personality characteristics—proves important for threat assessment. An analysis of a student's verbal communications, cognitions, and overt behaviors should be part of the threat assessment strategy. A positive and collaborative relationship between law enforcement personnel and students can increase information flow and enhance the accuracy and effectiveness of threat assessments. Also essential are close working relationships between law enforcement personnel and school administrators, teachers, and parents. ✦

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