

About School Shootings

Even before the 1999 Columbine High massacre and the subsequent tragedies at Sandy Hook Elementary and Marjory Stoneman Douglas High, violence and safety at schools have been major concerns. And many controversies have arisen about the causes and what schools can and should do (e.g., Is the problem the result of deficiencies in responding to student mental health problems? Should schools conduct active shooter simulations? Is gun reform policy essential? Should teacher be allowed to carry guns?)

Are School Shootings a Growing Problem?

Not all school shootings have been given extensive national media attention. Available statistics suggest that the problem has worsened in the U.S.A. since the 1970s. Education Week reported that in 2018 there were 24 school shootings with injuries or death, 114 people killed or injured in a school shooting, 35 people killed, 79 people injured, 28 students killed, and 7 school employees or other adults killed (Blad, et al., 2019). While relatively rare, shootings with multiple victims have become “more frequent and more deadly” (Cave, 2019). Speculations abound about reasons for this jarring reality; among the most frequently touted are untreated mental health problems, too many guns and too easy access to them, alienated students, and rampant bullying at schools.

Schools Increasingly are Focused on Safety and Preparedness

Schools deal with violence and safety in multiple ways and with significant variations. What follows are major examples.

Threat Detection. On December 14, 2012, at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, 20 year old Adam Lanza shot and killed twenty students and six faculty members. Lanza’s history indicated a desire to do the shooting, an obsession with pedophilia, and a scorn for humanity (Ortiz, 2018). These findings refueled the desire for threat detection.

While an understandable wish, the reality is that assessing whether a student will commit a violent act is subject to all the problems that arise when schools adopt formal screening devices. For a discussion of cautions related to assessing whether a student will commit a violent act, see <http://www2.ed.gov/admins/lead/safety/threatassessmentguide.doc> ; also Reddy, et al., 2001).

“Hardening” Security Measures. For some time, more and more schools have stressed closed campuses, camera monitoring, mental detectors, a growing police presence, and more. The pros and cons of these measures are widely debated.

For example, after the shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High, a variety of new security measures were advocated (e.g., see-through backpacks, bag searches, I.D. lanyards). Some schools are reported to have armed police officers with AR-15 rifles in front of the schools and patrolling fences. While reactions to such measures have been mixed, the impact of school climate generally is not positive, and many students appear skeptical that any of it will make them safer (Travis, 2019). Here’s a not untypical student reaction:

Trust me, where I’m from schools are already harder than you could imagine. We get up extra early every day to allow time to wait in line for the metal detectors. We’re disproportionately affected by zero-tolerance policies that funnel us into the school-to-prison pipeline....

<https://www.teenvogue.com/story/why-hardening-schools-wont-stop-violence-and-school-shootings>

*The above material reflects work done by Lindsey Lawler as part of her involvement with the national Center for MH in Schools & Student/Learning Supports at UCLA.

The center is co-directed by Howard Adelman and Linda Taylor and operates under the auspices of the School Mental Health Project, Dept. of Psychology, UCLA,
Website: <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu> Send comments to ltaylor@ucla.edu

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Preparedness. The Sandy Hook shooting motivated school districts to enhance crisis plans. In addition to hardening security, schools have beefed up their protocols for preparedness, response, and aftermath assistance. Considerable attention has been given to including active shooter drills.

Active Shooter Drills.

Fire and various natural disaster drills, Code Red lockdowns, and now *active shooter drills*.

One of the first states to implement an active shooter drill was Tampa Bay, Florida. The Tampa Bay Regional Domestic Security Task Force (TBRDSTF) carried out a drill in which several scenarios were acted out; the scenarios simulated “numerous injuries and fatalities” (Domestic Security Oversight Council, 2018). The objectives were to enhance students’ awareness, have them plan and discuss emergency protocols, and practice what they would do in a real-life situation.

To make active shooter drills increasingly realistic, some school simulations include use of firearms, gunshots, fake blood, and police officers (Rygg 2015). Some problems have arisen (see https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/indiana-teachers-reportedly-left-bloodied-and-bruised-during-active-shooter-drill/2019/03/21/e016233a-4bf7-11e9-93d0-64dbcf38ba41_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.bc9c89362876).

Some advocates argue for “Run, Hide, Fight” as a multifaceted response. Besides taking cover, students and staff are taught to take action against a shooter when there is an opportunity to do so. (There are videos showing them how to take a chair or a fire extinguisher and use it as a weapon.)

Critics of active shooter drills, including parents, school administrators, and lawmakers, worry that too much “drilling” will desensitize some and hypersensitize other students.

Crisis Response. Growing concerns about school safety and crises response have continued to underscore ways to improve crisis responses. For example, there are calls for ensuring that enough staff are prepared to provide both physical and psychological first aid. And the focus on mental health has heightened awareness of the need to address the many aftermath problems that arise.

For a detailed discussion and a framework for enhancing crisis response and prevention, see <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/pdfdocs/book/ch8crises.pdf>.

Arming Teachers

After every school shooting, discussions about gun control heat up. Ironically (and some argue relatedly), there was increased discourse about the idea of arming teachers after the Florida school shooting. Stressing Florida’s “Stand Your Ground Law,” advocates for such a policy argue that a person has a right to kill someone who is threatening to take their life. In this context, besides calls for schools to have armed police (e.g., Service Resource Officers – SROs), Minshew reported that in 2018 some states had already approved arming teachers (i.e., South Dakota, Tennessee, Alabama, Texas, Kansas, Oklahoma, Wyoming, Colorado, Ohio, Utah, and Indiana). Not surprisingly, the response has been overwhelmingly negative from most education and mental health associations and advocates for civil rights and students of color.

Students Call for Action

In an address to Florida lawmakers, Emma Gonzalez, a senior at Marjory Stoneman Douglas, stated:

Every single person here today, all these people should be home grieving. But instead we are up here standing together because if all our government can do is send thoughts and prayers, then it's time for victims to be the change that we need to see. . . . We are going to be the kids you read about in textbooks. Not because we're going to be another statistic about mass shooting in America, but because, . . . we are going to be the last mass shooting. . . . It's going to be due to the tireless effort of the school board, the faculty members, the family members and most of all the students.

One Teacher's Experience with a School Lockdown

As part of her participation at the UCLA Center, undergraduate Lindsey Lawler conducted a brief interview with a middle school teacher about a school lockdown that occurred in 2018.

Q. What was the reason for the lockdown?

A. It was before school, and a bus driver reported that he saw guns in a backpack, so he called the police and notified our school.

Q. What did you have your students do?

A. Well, it was before school, so, unfortunately, we didn't have anything in place, so the kids just started running. They just said to grab kids, and bring them into a classroom because they didn't know what to do.

Q. Do you have any active shooter emergency drills at your school? If so, what is the standard protocol?

A. We have to have drills once a month, but we've never done it before school, during lunch, break, or after school when all the kids are out. It's always timed at a certain time, so all the kids know what to do. But, that's all changed now. Now, they tell us (the teachers), but they do it in the middle of lunch. Kids cannot leave the classroom until there is an announcement. Most shooters now pull fire alarms during lunch when there's the most kids possible.

Q. What do the drills consist of?

A. For the active shooter drill, the kids are now supposed to grab whatever they can grab something like scissors. They don't teach you to crouch in the corner anymore.

Q. How are emergency drills different today from when you were in school?

A. They don't teach the kids to turn the lights off and sit in the corner anymore where the teacher is supposed to protect you. We have videos now on how to take a chair or a fire extinguisher and use it as a weapon in case of an active shooter.

Q. What are you, as a teacher, supposed to do if there is an active shooter?

A. We have to watch a video at the beginning of the year. They train us to grab something heavy and to stay away from the windows. If it is an actual drill, we go to the back of the school, and all of us have certain jobs like search and rescue, where we would search for dead bodies. There's also first aid and many other jobs that teachers have in case of an actual emergency. Everyone also has walkie-talkies.

Q. Are there any specific security measures such as bag checks, more cameras, or teacher training?

A. They now have tinted windows and ladders for the teachers and students on the second floor, and we're not allowed to leave the classroom. We also have a full time police officer. Mostly, we just have the Remind app, and if the principals get on there, they're supposed to notify us if we're in danger or not.

Lindsey's thoughts after the interview:

"Some of the answers were jarring. When I was in the K-12 public school system, we were always taught to just lock the doors, turn off the lights, and hide under a desk or in the corner. Now, students are taught to grab any weapon they can such as scissors or a fire extinguisher.

One thing in particular that I found intriguing was the idea of having ladders and tinted windows. These can be considered both emergency protocols and security measures and highlight that schools cannot just look at the big picture. They need to think of smaller things as well (e.g., things that can facilitate escaping from the building).

Another idea that I gathered from the interview was the Remind app. This app is designed to "keep students safe during an active shooter" (Powell & Beken, 2018). The app is primarily used as a resource for teachers and first responders to alert each other in case of an actual emergency. This could essentially be more beneficial than an intercom system because it is more subtle, and it is automatically reported to the police."

Concluding Comments

Schools (and society at large) certainly must enhance safety. However, plans for responding to shooters and other crises must reflect concern for a healthy and caring school climate. School climate suffers from an overemphasis on “hardening” schools.

Healthy and caring schools don’t wait to react to tragic events. They are proactive in working with their surrounding community to improve schools in ways that promote positive social-emotional development and prevent problems, as well as having a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of supports in place to address the many barriers to learning and teaching that are encountered each day.

All efforts to make schools safer must fully reflect our society's commitment to equity, fairness, and justice. And, if the commitment to ensuring equity, fairness, and justice is to be meaningful, it cannot be approached simplistically. With these matters as context, safe school practices must be embedded into improvements that contribute to transforming schools in ways that more effectively close the all to prevalent opportunity and achievement gaps.

For more, see

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And for more on improving school improvement, see
http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/improving_school_improvement.html

A Sample of References Used in Developing this Resource

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