

FIVE MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT SCHOOL SHOOTINGS

By Peter Langman, Anthony Petrosino, and Hannah Persson

Although school shootings receive extensive media coverage, there is 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 educators, reporters, and the public, this article takes a brief look at five common misconceptions about school shootings and their perpetrators.

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 a 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 U.S. Department of Education following the Columbine massacre in 1999 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 relationship between perpetrators and the schools they attack. Most perpetrators are current students at the schools they attack, but others attack schools they attended years before, and another group of perpetrators commit attacks against schools where they never had any previous connection. The motivations for 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. For example, following the Columbine massacre, early media accounts indicated that the two perpetrators had been bullied. Later accounts indicated that the killers had been well-liked and rarely bullied (Cullen, 2009; Schildkraut & Elsass, 2016). 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. Many people believe the stereotype that the shooters are outcasts who are bullied into retaliation against their tormentors. But this characterization of shooters is rarely accurate. Langman’s research, for example, found that many of the shooters were not bullied, and those who were bullied rarely aimed their attacks at the particular students who had picked on them (Langman, 2015, 2017). This finding raises questions about the significance of harassment as a motivation for their attacks. The people who have been most commonly targeted by shooters are school administrators who had disciplined the perpetrators, teachers who had failed them, and 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) of them are not loners. School shooters often have friends and have dated. Among adult school shooters, some of them have married and had children. In addition, shooters are not necessarily detached misfits. They sometimes have played school sports and have been involved in other school or community activities. One

had even been voted Homecoming Prince.

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 misconception that the shooter always is a victim of mental illness. There are many shortcomings to this misconception, including that it 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 youth who commit school shootings, are clearly not psychologically healthy. The ways in which they are psychologically distressed, however, vary. Although there is no single psychological profile that fits all school shooters, the perpetrators tend to fall into one of three categories: psychopathic,

psychotic, or traumatized (Langman, 2009).

- Psychopathic shooters are profoundly narcissistic, lack empathy for others, disregard laws and morality, have a sense of entitlement, and are easily enraged when their desires are thwarted. An example of this is one of the Columbine killers, who is described in definitive works on the massacre as being a sociopath with little regard for others (Cullen, 2009).
- Psychotic shooters experience one or more symptoms of psychosis, such as auditory hallucinations, paranoid delusions, or delusions of grandeur. They also tend to have impaired social-emotional functioning that can leave them depressed and envious of their peers. For example, in 1998, a young man killed his parents and then (the following day) shot 27 people, killing two, at Thurston High School in Springfield, Oregon. This killer fits into this category because he had both auditory hallucinations and paranoid delusions. This is the category that most aligns with the view that the school shooter is mentally ill.
- Traumatized shooters come from severely and chronically dysfunctional families. These family traumas can include parental substance abuse, parental criminal behavior, domestic violence, and child abuse. For example, in 1997, a student shot four people, killing two, at a school in Bethel, Alaska. He is categorized as a traumatized shooter because his father was a violent criminal, his mother was severely alcoholic,

and he was beaten by several of his mother's boyfriends and was molested in a foster home.

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 (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.

Research underscores the importance of utilizing *threat assessment* to identify potential shooters before they show up at the school armed and ready to kill. Although there is no single demographic or other consistent 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 multi-disciplinary 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 purpose of threat assessment is 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 student 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 student's home and/or to place the student 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. This perspective is problematic. If school staff have no information about the students at a particular school, it would be impossible to determine who might become violent and intervene. It is not unusual, however, for school personnel to have information that suggests that a particular student might pose a risk for violence. For example, if a student makes a threat via social media or to a peer, talks to his 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.

Resources for threat assessment and identifying warning signs can be found at <https://schoolshooters.info/prevention> and in *Enhancing School Safety Using a Threat Assessment Model*, a publication by the National Threat Assessment Center (2018). 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. Everyone involved with schools — including educators, reporters, and the public — would do well to keep a balanced perspective about school shootings. National data indicate that homicides of school-aged children (ages 5–18) are far less likely to occur on school grounds than elsewhere (Petrosino, 2018). Nonetheless, school shootings do occur, are especially traumatic, and generate considerable policy action (Petrosino & Boal, 2018). 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.

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About the authors

Peter Langman is a national expert on school shooters and has authored two books: *School Shooters: Understanding High School, College, and Adult Perpetrators* and *Why Kids Kill: Inside the Minds of School Shooters*.

Anthony Petrosino is Director of the Justice & Prevention Research Center and Associate Director of the Health & Justice Program at WestEd.

Hannah Persson is a Research Assistant in the Justice & Prevention Research Center.

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