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Preface

This is the fifth in a series of white papers sponsored by the Kean University Center for History, Politics, and Policy. This paper, authored by Dr. James Drylie, Professor of Criminal Justice, explores the complexities of gun control legislation and school safety.

On behalf of the University and the CHPP, we thank Dr. Drylie for his excellent contribution, and believe you will find this paper informative.

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About the Contributing Author:

James Drylie, Ph.D., is a professor of criminal justice with an extensive background as a police executive and commanding officer. Dr. Drylie was selected to attend the Secret Service National Threat Assessment Center in 2002 as a part of the ongoing initiative to train local and state officers in understanding school-related violence, specifically the active shooter. Dr. Drylie has been with Kean University since 2006 and is currently the Executive Director of the School of Criminal Justice & Public Administration.

School-related shootings: Understanding the nature and prevalence of targeted violence.

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Problem

School-related shootings involve a number of variables that do not lend themselves to easy or instantaneous remedy. Examination of school-related shootings needs to be considered in the larger issue of *workplace violence*. The aftermath of these incidents often involves significant focus on the instruments and mechanisms, the mental health of the assailant, the system response to the incident, and equal amount of finger pointing that is more counterproductive than helpful. Prevention and protection are discussed at local, state, and federal levels in terms of legislation and resources, yet these incidents continue to occur. There is no panacea or a singular strategy that can and will stop this form of carnage. It will take a sustained collaboration from diverse fields in academia, law, medicine, practitioners, community groups, and legislators.

Introduction

Mass shootings occurring on any number of school campuses nationwide is rapidly eroding any sense of normalcy associated with these institutions as places of learning in a safe and secure environment. Fire drills in schools across the country are being replaced with *lock downs* and *CODE RED* alerts. The development of lesson plans and lectures are being overshadowed with concerns of threats and the potential for harm, and local, state, and federal law enforcement agencies have seen a paradigm shift in previous response strategies of containment to dynamic tactics in response to an *active shooter*. The senseless nature of mass murder directed at children, teachers, and staff defies logical explanation.

This paper will examine the prevalence of mass shootings, particularly school-related incidents in the United States, general discussions and recommendations for legislation intended to prevent future incidents, and issues relative to *target hardening* of schools, colleges and similar institutions. Recognizing that targeted violence does not occur in a vacuum and that workplace violence and school shootings have stark similarities and equally devastating impacts on society,

this discussion will focus primarily on the latter. This dialogue is expected to encourage and foster a multi-disciplinary approach of analysis and understanding that can result in a uniform approach to help restore the diminishing sense of normalcy and safety associated with sending our children to school or college.

Prevalence

The carnage that occurred at Sandy Hook Elementary School at the hands of a lone gunman, Adam Lanza, on December 14, 2012, resulted in the death of 20 children and six adults. Armed with three weapons, a .223 caliber rifle and two semi-automatic handguns (10mm & 9mm), the shooter entered the school just after 9:30 a.m. and began the assault that left 26 innocent victims dead, shooting all multiple times. The incident ended when Lanza, who is suspected of killing his mother in her home before he went to the school, committed suicide at the scene using the 10mm pistol.

This was not the first mass shooting or murder in the Nation, and sadly will not be the last. The literature, government reports, social media, and investigative journalists note the prevalence of this particular form of targeted violence in the later part of the twentieth century with the emphasis of reporting and assessment on the number of killed and/or wounded. Little discussion in this regard considers the extensive form of vicarious victimization that occurs, and is compounded with successive incidents. Parents of school and college age children often express fear and concern over the possibility that similar or copycat incidents will harm their loved ones and the uncertainty creates a separate type of victimization in the form of anxiety and fear.

Although mass murder is not a recent phenomenon in the United States, targeting children as evident in the case of Sandy Hook has brought a Nation to collectively ask two questions: Why, and how can it be stopped? The answers to these questions are not that simple.

Much of what was reported on the incident at Sandy Hook by the news and social media sites included exhaustive references to previous school-related and other mass shootings over the course of the past 30 plus years. Daily newspaper reports listed any number of mass shootings and summarized data on the frequency of incidents, gun ownership, violence in general, and discussions regarding varying views on gun control.

Targeted Violence & Threat Assessment

The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) analyzed school-related shootings soon after the tragedy at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, where Eric Harris and Dylan Kiebold killed 13 and wounded 21 in what was at the time the deadliest shooting in the country's history. From the platform of the National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime (NCAVC), which was established in the early 1980s, the FBI began an in-depth analysis of these types of shootings in an effort to gain a better understanding of the incident, the shooter, and location (FBI, 1999). In the assessment of school-related shootings the FBI looked for threat related variables that could and would be present prior to a school-related shooting or similar type of violent incident. Recognizing that "All threats are NOT created equal" (FBI, 1999, p.5), the FBI urged that the process of identifying and responding to threats of any nature should be standardized and handled by trained individuals. The threat assessment model provided by the FBI offers a clear

understanding of the types and level of threats and an assessment model as a means of evaluating the potential of a threat developing into actual violence (FBI, 1999).

With the National Threat Assessment Center foundation, the Secret Service relied on the research focused on targeted violence and began the exhaustive analysis of school-related shootings in the United States. Academics, medical and legal experts in conjunction with personnel from the Secret Service were committed to seeking and identifying common variables that could be identified in cases of targeted violence, specifically school-related shootings.

The work of the FBI and Secret Service provides a clearer picture of several common variables present in many of the cases. Increased understanding of threat assessment and targeted violence can serve as excellent tools in identifying and preventing potential school-related shootings.

Whether involving a school, college or the workplace, there is one common thread that is found in the majority of the cases: Warning signs. The nature of these indicators is common in other acts of violence, including suicide. Pre-incident behavior and communication, both verbal and non-verbal, can and often will raise concerns for family, friends, co-workers, and mental health professionals in some cases. Sadly, these indicators emerge just prior to an incident, which may not allow for adequate intervention, or after the fact, when it is clearly too late. The obvious limitations of these models is the premise that trained individuals in education, law enforcement and/or the mental health fields would be in the position to identify and/or react to possible indicators.

Protection

Mass shootings have occurred in so many locations in the past few years; schools, colleges, houses of worship, military bases, workplaces, theaters, shopping malls, and post offices, that no place or person is immune from these senseless attacks. An obvious result to the seemingly random and unpredictable nature of many of these attacks can foster a general feeling of vulnerability in communities across the Nation. Recognizing that workplace violence and school-related shootings are forms of targeted violence, and threat assessments may be helpful in identifying potential or possible violence, past experience demonstrates that assaults of this nature occur with such levels of speed, surprise, and violence of action that pre-incident protection is more an afterthought than a proactive measure.

The desire and expectations relating to protection against school-related shootings cannot, and will not, be resolved with a single measure; there is no simple solution. The immediate response centers on gun control, specifically regarding assault weapons, high-capacity magazines and ammunition. Cases involving assailants diagnosed or determined to be mentally ill often focus on the individual and the illness without adequate understanding of case specific circumstances. Recommendations for increasing security in and around schools or colleges focuses more on detection and restriction of access, many times losing sight of the human element of students, faculty, staff, and parents in bypassing established security measures. The dialogue in general is broad in scope and intensity, but the three dominant points are gun control, mental health, and facility security.

Gun Control

The debate on gun control has, and continues to be, a polarizing issue across the Nation with arguments centering primarily on two issues: Control versus rights. With few exceptions, the issues of control versus rights have little in the way of common ground, and any form of consensus is likely not going to be reached before the next mass shooting or school-related incident occurs. Overall, this past year saw record settings numbers of gun sales with over 16 million background checks being processed by November 2012 (Date, Thomas, & Ryan, 2012). According to one public health policy initiative, GunPolicy.org, there are an estimated 270 million privately owned firearms in the United States, and the United States is ranked first in the world for privately owned firearms (GunPolicy.org, 2103).

A recent CBS NEWS/*New York Times* survey suggests that by and large the American public (92%) supports background checks for the purchase of firearms. (Edwards-Levy, 2013). Yet, this form of regulation is far from becoming a national standard. The Coalition to Stop Gun Violence (CSGV) reports that federal legislation in this regard only regulates firearms sold by licensed firearms dealers, which covers approximately 60 percent of these types of sales in the United States (CSGV, 2013). Under the Brady Handgun Violence Prevention Act of 1993, the FBI maintains the National Instant Criminal Background Check System (NICS) to assist dealers with federal firearms licenses (FFL) to check for a criminal record or other restrictions of potential buyers (FBI, 2103). The NICS has led to over 700,000 denials of weapons purchases in more than 100 million checks using this system (FBI, 2013). Private sales of weapons, assuming the sale is lawful in the sense that the weapon is registered and both the buyer and seller are engaged in a legitimate transaction, is not covered or included in these figures

Locally, there are only a nominal number of states (CA, CO, IL, NY, OR, RI) that require background checks for purchase of firearms at gun shows, with an even smaller number of states (CT, MD, PA) requiring checks specifically for handguns purchases (CSGV, 2013). The numbers and lack of uniformed standards for background checks at gun shows becomes even more clouded when it is likely that there is not a uniform definition of what constitutes a gun show. Some estimates of the number of gun shows conducted annually in the United States hovers around 2000; while the National Association of Arms Shows indicates that the numbers are closer to 5200 per year with some five million attendees (Violence Policy Institute, 2013). All of this is commonly referred to by legislators, pundits, and anti- and pro-gun advocates as the *gun show loophole*. Closing the loophole assumes the continued practice of buying and selling firearms at loosely organized and regulated events. One suggestion toward this end would be the establishment of federally and state controlled databases that allow for and require potential buyers to complete background checks in advance of the event. This can be accomplished similarly to motor vehicle licensure and registration renewals. Obviously, any system is subject to security issues, but this form of data collection is an everyday aspect of life with little to no inconvenience and surely would not be an infringement on individual rights.

Another factor that has been the subject of significant national polls is the opinions of Americans on gun laws in general. A recent *Rasmussen* survey on views relative to creating new legislation to control the ownership, sale, and possession of firearms, or simply to enforce current laws, indicates that a majority (57%) of Americans support stricter enforcement of current laws as opposed to creating new laws (2013). Conversely, a nationwide University of Connecticut-*Hartford Courant* Poll suggests that half of those surveyed (50%) are in favor of stricter gun

laws. The Pew Research Center has conducted similar research and reports that in the wake of the Columbine High School shooting in 1999 a majority of Americans (65%) agreed with the belief that restricting gun ownership in America should take precedent over the rights related to gun ownership (2010). However, as previously stated in this paper, with the passage of time that pendulum eventually swings back towards center, even moving to more conservative views on gun control and ownership. The support for increased gun control in the aftermath of Columbine (65%) dropped substantially to the mid-50 percent range by 2008 (Pew Research, 2010).

Calls for the total restriction and elimination of firearms will not be a reality in the United States now or in the foreseeable future. Advocacy for gun control is a legitimate and necessary factor in reducing violence, specifically the type of targeted violence resulting in mass murder. However, these demands can be, and often become, counter-productive and overlook the obvious; with an estimated 270 million privately owned firearms in the United States the desire in this regard will be significantly overshadowed by reality.

The paucity of state laws requiring background checks for purchases of firearms at gun shows is further compounded by loopholes that dilute the intention of meaningful gun control legislation. Loopholes become more a matter of political expediency, even survival, in the face of various lobbying efforts of constituents. Similarly, the efforts of a president or state executives are subject to political party affiliations that result more in a mentality of political survival than rational behavior.

Making Schools Safer

Local schools and college campuses across the United States are designed physically to be centers for learning and community interaction, not isolated fortresses. Can safe and secure learning environments operate in the face of mounting assaults by heavily armed individuals intent on causing mass casualties, and with little or no regard for self-preservation?

Criminologists and other criminal justice experts note that in order for a crime to be committed there needs to be three elements; a motivated offender, a suitable target, and the absence of a suitable guardian. The assumption that school campuses serve as a suitable guardian against harm in this regard is clearly more effervescent today than it ever was. The call for increased security in local schools, specifically armed guards, has been given more credence on the heels of the Sandy Hook school shooting. With the increased call to put more police in schools, even the recommendation to arm teachers, there are words of caution from law enforcement, mental health and school administrators calling for restraint.

Increasing the security measures in and around schools and colleges are fast becoming a way of life for many. The ability to secure a facility and those within is based on the assumption that the threat is external. What about internal threats? The 36 documented cases of school-related shootings or threat-related incidents are indicative of the potential for harm from internal threats alone (Dedman, 2000). Steps and measures to keep threats out of the facility may prove to be a more achievable goal than to identifying and securing threats from within. Just how successful any security measure is also difficult to assess since displacement or prevention is an intangible that does not lend to easy identification. Common police practices to displace criminal opportunities through increased enforcement and target-hardening often displace crime to other

areas, usually those outside of that jurisdiction. Similarly, target-hardening and increased security efforts in one school district or campus may displace a potential assailant to another location.

Regardless of the deterrent, there is also the high likelihood that any potential assailant is not concerned with obstacles or stricter penalties for criminal acts of this nature. Can society protect the innocent from acts of violence perpetrated by someone intent on mass carnage and in a number of cases, suicide? The answer is yes. The key is sustained vigilance to established security principles at all times, and open communication with all those who are alerted to the indicators or warning signs that may be evident before an incident unfolds.

Conclusion

The sense of normalcy in the Nations' schools and colleges continues to erode in the aftermath of the Sandy Hook Elementary tragedy that left 26 students and faculty dead in December 2012. Acts such as this are truly senseless and defy logic, yet there is a warped sense of purpose on the part of the assailant. An integral part in preventing future acts of this nature is to gain an increased understanding of the motivators that drive this distorted purpose, and to look closer at key indicators or warning signs that are likely present prior to heinous acts such as this occurring.

The work of the FBI and Secret Service, academics, medical and legal experts along with other subject matter experts have examined these incidents for close to 30 years. Increased understanding of the nature of targeted violence and threat assessment has provided invaluable

insight into what can and often does drive these individuals to commit such heinous acts. Yet, they are still occurring and the carnage is showing signs of increasing in terms of the number and type of victims. The work of these federal agencies and supporting experts needs to be communicated deeper within the fabric of society. No one agency or institution can nor should be expected to prevent these incidents from occurring, but with increased levels of communication and information sharing the possibility of mitigating potential or real threats can have positive results from a prevention standpoint.

The current debate on control versus ownership of guns is an unnecessary distraction to an otherwise common goal: End the carnage. The lack of consensus on what needs to be done in this regard fosters a polarizing form of partisanship that is not only counterproductive, but equally troubling in the delays created by endless debate. These delays cost lives. The time, effort and money spent debating can be re-directed to more useful, productive purposes designed and expected to shift away from increasing numbers of attempted or completed incidents to safer levels of pre-incident intervention.

Finally, the subject of school security and target hardening has paralleled increased public and private dialogue on just how can schools be better protected. The calls for placing police or armed security, even arming teachers, in schools have been met with tempered calls for restraint. Schools and colleges are intended and designed as places for learning, not maximum security facilities. An effort to make buildings impenetrable from outside attack does not render the building safe from attack from within. The ability to compromise or breach security by someone from inside is often what occurs with incidents of workplace violence. Intimate knowledge and

experience of the system is critical in planning such an attack. Even the shooting in the Century Theater in Aurora, Colorado by James Holmes was accomplished by an internal security breach by Holmes who had left his arsenal in his vehicle parked outside of an emergency exit

Overall, this paper is an attempt to raise awareness of the extent and nature of mass murder, specifically school-related shootings that have occurred in the United States in the past 30 plus years. The nature of these incidents are truly difficult to predict and prevent in that there is a perceived lack of knowledge for the potential for violence, when in actuality many of these incidents are preceded by indicators and warning signs that are missed or overlooked, or in the worst possible scenario they may be ignored. The tragedy at Sandy Hook Elementary School in December 2012 cannot become a memory or a mere statistic; it must be the catalyst for meaningful and substantive changes in how targeted violence that is directed at the future of this great country, our children, is handled thereby making these incidents a thing of the past.

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