Chapter 2
School Shootings:
Lessons From the Past, and Are We Doomed to Repeat Them?

Patricia A. Goforth
Colorado State University – Global Campus, USA

ABSTRACT

In the late 1990s, a series of school shootings shocked the nation. Seemingly innocent children with little to no history of deviant behavior engaged in horrific acts of violence against their fellow students and teachers. The previously held beliefs that schools were safe had been shattered by these acts, and social scientists answered the call to find answers as to how and why these acts occurred. In this chapter, the authors discuss what is known about school shooters in terms of characteristics, behaviors, history, as well as the social dynamics of the communities in which they typically reside. While a profile of a school shooter has been deemed inaccurate, are we doomed to make the same mistakes by overlooking signals or warnings provided by shooters?

INTRODUCTION

In the 1970s the American public became concerned with mass violence, particularly mass shootings, occurring in public schools. The issue came to the forefront of the American vernacular in the mid – to late 1990s after a series of mass school shootings in suburban and rural areas gripped the nation. These events dominated the attention of the both the local and national media creating concern and fear surrounding the safety of students and teachers attending school.

What was to become known as the worst school shooting in American history took place on April 20, 1999. School shootings, bullying, gun control, mental illness and the use of violent video games among juveniles became part of a nationwide conversation when the horrific events unfolded at Columbine High School in the suburban community of Littleton, Colorado. Two armed gunmen, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, students attending Columbine, stormed the high school killing thirteen and injuring more than twenty people before turning the guns on themselves (Lozada, 2016).

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-6684-7464-8.ch002

The Columbine massacre became the benchmark by which all future school shootings would be compared. In many of the attacks perpetrated post-Columbine, shooters would acknowledge both in interviews and manifestos left behind, that Columbine was the inspiration behind the their attacks (Larkin, 2009; Hong, Cho, Allen-Meares, Espelage, 2011; Coleman, 2002). The disbelief that young and seemingly unobtrusive students could engage in such horrific acts of violence led to public pleas for answers about how and why these events can happen and explanations for these unspeakable tragedies.

Three additional school shootings occurred in 1999 after Columbine as well as many others in the years that followed in what seemed to be an outbreak of school shootings. The intense media coverage given to each shooting incident created a "climate of fear" among parents, students and politicians that our children were no longer safe in what was once believed to be one of the safest places for children. The public's perception seemed to be that the U.S. was in the midst of an epidemic of school shootings (Newman, Fox, Harding, Mehta & Roth, 2004; Verlinden, Hersen & Thomas, 2000). Questions regarding the motives and motivations behind such attacks and ways to prevent future attacks dominated American discourse. Based on what we have learned about adolescent shooters from prior incidents, what do we know about prevention of future shootings or are we doomed to make the same mistakes?

PRIOR PREVENTATIVE MEASURES

Policy debates focusing on school safety and prevention of school shootings dominated the attention of legislators following the shootings in the late 1990s. The result was a series of policies designed to protect students and provide increased safety measures at schools. Policies like intense surveillance measures of students on school campuses, zero tolerance policies (which, in essence, criminalized even the most minor infractions in an effort to prevent more serious crimes from occurring), and profiling among others, were implemented and simultaneously sharply criticized as being poorly placed, militarizing schools and criminalizing students (Lewis, 2003). Other critics condemned the implementation of such strict security measures and policies stating that schools were being turned into environments similar to prisons, disrupting educational opportunities of students and detracting from what should be a learning-based environment. The disparity with which school official's implemented policies also came under intense scrutiny. Zero tolerance and other security measures were alleged to have been discriminatory in nature. Disparate treatment among students by school staff and law enforcement was alleged based largely on race but also on economic status (Nance, 2013; Verlinden, Hersen & Thomas, 2000; Trone, 1998).

PROFILING A SCHOOL SHOOTER

Social scientists also answered the public's demand for intervention and prevention by developing a profile, or typology, of a juvenile that posed significant risk of becoming a school shooter. The factors that were implicated in these mass shootings were complied using characteristics identified from shooters in prior incidents and through historical accounts of friends and family of the shooter. A methodological concern in the creation of the typology is the number of shooters from which information can be gathered. So few of these school shooters survived the incidents which left a very limited number of juvenile shooters to study. With a limited number of case studies from which researchers could draw upon, the information gathered and used in the creation of the profile of a school shooter would later