Chapter 1

It Can Happen Here:
Addressing School Safety and Security After a Mass Shooting in a Small Kansas Town

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ABSTRACT

On February 26, 2016, a mass shooting happened in the quiet town of Hesston, Kansas. A disgruntled employee opened fire at the Excel Industries plant, located directly across the street from the public-school complex. Four people were killed, and 14 others sustained serious injuries. This chapter reports findings from an interpretive qualitative study conducted to understand perceptions of safety and security

measures taken in Hesston public schools after the shooting. The authors conducted personal interviews and focus groups which allowed for gathering and analyzing people's perspectives. Documents and artifacts were collected, and media coverage of the shooting was analyzed. Observations regarding safety and security measures were carried out at each school building. The results showed participants hold a strong attachment to their community that sustains the belief that Hesston is a safe place. They trust their law enforcement and other community leaders to take appropriate security measures.

INTRODUCTION

On February 26, 2016, the small town of Hesston, Kansas was rocked to its core when a disgruntled employee opened fire at the Excel Industries factory, located directly across the street from the public school complex. Three employees were killed, and 14 others were seriously injured before the Police Chief shot and killed the shooter. That something so horrific could happen in this largely peaceful Mennonite community where unlocked doors on homes and keys left in cars was a common occurrence, seemed unthinkable at the time. This event prompted the school district, in consultation with the local Police Department and the Department of Homeland Security, to take stock of their safety and security measures. The qualitative case study reported in this chapter was conducted at the request of Hesston school district's leadership to gauge perceptions of the response to the shooting and the measures either planned for or put in place to increase school safety and security in a small town where events like a mass shooting "don't happen here."

RESEARCH PROBLEM

Schools in communities of all sizes across the United States are confronting safety and security concerns (Shelton, Owens, & Song, 2009). Feeling safe at school is a necessary precondition for student learning and optimal physical, emotional, and social development (S. Williams, Schneider, Wornell, & Langhinrichsen-Rohling, 2018). Over the past two decades, highly publicized episodes of violence and mass casualties in the US have generated considerable public concern and triggered substantial changes in school security practices (Cornell & Mayer, 2010). With the number of high-profile school shootings resulting in mass casualties, many small towns have struggled with determining proper safety and security measures both in the schools and the community at large (Diepenbrock, 2010).

Technology such as metal detectors and security cameras, as well as trained personnel such as school resource officers and private security guards, are some of the visible measures implemented to prevent school violence (Addington, 2009). The paradox is that schools may be unintentionally increasing fear while trying to decrease or prevent violence (Lindle, 2008; Perumean-Chaney & Sutton, 2013). Thus, students' *feeling* of safety and *being* safe at school are both important but not always compatible goals

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