



Chapter 2

The Belgrade School Shooting in 2023 and the Serbian Government's Response Within the Framework of Legal and Education Systems

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ABSTRACT

On May 3, 2023, Serbia, a country with strict gun regulations, was confronted for the first time with a mass shooting, which took place at an elite school in the capital Belgrade. After the shooting, the Serbian Government introduced measures to prevent such incidents from happening again. This chapter analyzes the measures, focusing on two questions: 1) What did the country, which already has strict gun regulations, established MACR at the level of most European countries, and police presence in schools, do when it was confronted with a school shooting for the first time; and 2) Have the measures of the same content proven effective in current practice in the countries where they were implemented? In this context, the measures introducing innovations in the Serbian legal and education systems are analyzed and the results of previous studies, especially the experiences in European countries and the United States, are discussed in this chapter.

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MASS SCHOOL SHOOTINGS AND APPROPRIATE RESPONSE

Mass school shootings are a particular form of gun violence in schools. According to the most cited academic definition (Booty et al., 2019), a mass shooting is “an incident where four or more individuals are killed by a single, or sometimes a pair of perpetrators.” In addition, a school shooting is referred to as an incident of mass shooting in a school that was “confirmed by authorities where four or more individuals were at risk of being shot” (Reeping et al., 2022, p. 4), that involved students attending the school, occurred on a school-related “public stage” and resulted in multiple casualties (Newman, 2004). Despite being one of the rarest forms of gun violence in schools (Madfis, 2020), mass school shootings have long-term negative effects on the mental health of survivors, with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and depression being the most commonly reported. Children and adolescents who were exposed to these events often had higher rates of mental health disorders, including PTSD, compared to adults (Lowe & Galea, 2017; Stene et al., 2019).

The response to mass school shootings is most often emotional and consists of increasing security measures and preparing for the next shooting rather than supporting efforts to prevent gun violence (Cornell, 2018). More specifically, fear of a potential mass school shooting has led school officials to invest heavily in security measures (i.e., target hardening) and overuse zero-tolerance disciplinary practices (Hirschfield, 2018; Linskey, 2013). This type of response is consistent with the most used approach to addressing gun violence in schools, which focuses almost exclusively on reactive strategies that address gun violence at the moment it occurs, rather than preventive strategies (Rajan et al., 2022). However, the most effective, evidence-based approaches to reducing gun violence in schools correspond to a public health approach that focuses on proactive and preventive efforts (Flannery et al., 2019). This approach utilizes three levels of prevention. The first involves promoting the safety and well-being of all by enhancing students’ social and emotional learning, improving school climate, and maintaining physically and emotionally safe conditions and positive school environments, and reducing the availability of guns among youth (Cornell, 2018; Flannery et al., 2019; Flannery et al., 2021). This includes implementing programs and practices that cultivate a sense of belonging, foster positive connections between students, peers, and teachers, and encourage children to take more personal responsibility (Reeping et al., 2021; Leurent et al., 2021).

In this context, school climate and school belonging play the most important role. If students have a positive perception of the school climate, they are less likely to engage in aggressive behaviors (Espelage et al., 2014; Steffgen et al., 2013). Furthermore, students’ perceptions of school connectedness are associated with fewer behavioral incidents in the classroom and less bullying (Steffgen et al., 2013; Thapa

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