

EFFECTIVE RESPONSE TO SCHOOL VIOLENCE

EFFECTIVE RESPONSE TO SCHOOL VIOLENCE

**A Guide for Educators and
Law Enforcement Personnel**

By

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This book is dedicated to the people who have experienced school violence. These people have experienced the incalculable costs of death, emotional distress, physical injury, facility destruction, disruption of classes, negative public perception, civil/criminal lawsuits and the resulting embarrassment these acts generate. These people need to know that they are not alone; nearly everyone in a community, if not the nation, is touched in some way.

Their sacrifice has not been in vain. Entire communities now have a better awareness and understanding of school violence. The benefits from this act are both long-term and short-term. Over the long term, community awareness and involvement will help reduce school violence. In the short-term, it is vital that people realize that school violence can occur in their community.

Finally, society has come to understand that school safety is everyone's job. Teachers, administrators, parents, community members, and students all have a stake in proactive measures focused on identifying troubled students, intervening when required, quickly and efficiently responding to school violence in progress and addressing the tragic aftermath that will follow.

INTRODUCTION

Granted, most schools are safe. Fewer than one percent of all violent deaths of children occur on school grounds; however, no school is immune from school violence. As a result of the recent armed assaults targeting learning institutions, many school administrators and government entities are searching for proactive solutions. Indeed, educational entities can no longer afford the false assumption that “nothing has ever happened here and nothing ever will.” This false assumption ignores the changing contemporary circumstances of politics, demographics, sociological views, target criticality, and vulnerability. Indeed, violence can happen at any time, anywhere, and include anyone’s son or daughter.

Furthermore, school violence incidents often generate fear and concern among victims, survivors, and the broader public, and have the potential to escalate into copy-cat actions. Recent school shootings have changed the face of school security forever and serve as harbingers of a new era in school violence. It is an era when violence is both random and carefully executed, ambitious and without conscious, horrifically deadly and yet perpetrated by the child next door. Twelve shootings in U.S. schools brings this point home. They include the following:

1. February 19, 1997–Bethel, Arkansas—A 16-year-old student fatally shoots a fellow student and the principal, and wounds two other students.
2. October 1, 1997–Pearl, Mississippi—A 17-year-old boy kills his mother and shoots nine students, two fatally.
3. December 1, 1997–West Paducah, Kentucky—Three students are killed and five others wounded by a 14-year-old student.
4. March 24, 1998–Jonesboro, Arkansas—Four girls and one teacher are shot to death and ten people wounded when two boys, 11 and 13, open fire from the woods after setting off a false fire alarm at a middle school.
5. April 24, 1998–Edinboro, Pennsylvania—A science teacher is shot to death, another teacher and two pupils are wounded in front of students at an eighth-grade graduation dance. A 14-year-old student awaits trial.
6. May 19, 1998–Fayetteville, Tennessee—An 18-year-old honor student opens fire in a high school parking lot, killing a classmate who was dating his ex-girlfriend.
7. May 21, 1998–Springfield, Oregon—A 15-year-old boy opens fire

killing two students and injuring more than 20. His parents are found slain in their home.

8. April 16, 1999—Notus, Idaho—A high school sophomore fires two shotgun blasts in a school hallway. No injuries.

9. April 20, 1999—Littleton, Colorado—Two young men, ages 17 and 18, dressed in black trench coats, open fire, killing 12 students and one teacher.

10. May 20, 1999—Conyers, Georgia—A 15-year-old boy armed with two guns, opens fire on students—wounding six. The suspect surrendered to the assistant principal.

11. November 19, 1999—Deming, New Mexico—A young boy, dressed in camouflage clothing, shoots and critically wounds a 13-year-old female classmate in the lobby of a middle school. The victim dies two days later. The boy also pointed the gun at the principal and assistant principal before surrendering.

12. December 7, 1999—Fort Gibson, Oklahoma—A 13-year-old boy, armed with a handgun shoots four students as they attempted to enter a middle school before classes started. The boy fired 14 rounds before dropping the handgun.

NOTE: Please keep in mind, the above described incidents are actual shootings, they do not include the numerous threats and other types of violent confrontations that are made throughout the country every day. In fact, the author was going to record and include all incidences of school violence, but they have become so numerous that gathering information would be a huge tasking which would have no foreseeable end point.

There are few accurate up-to-date statistics tracking how many firearms or other weapons have been found in schools or discovered before entry into schools. Further, there are many studies in the statistical pool. Some studies reveal discrepancies, however, most studies reveal a great deal of concurrence. One example, an Executive Summary titled *Indicators of School Crime and Safety 1998*, prepared by the U.S. Department of Education and the U.S. Department of Justice, has shed some light on many statistics concerning school violence.

For example, in 1996, students ages 12 through 18 were victims of about 225,000 incidents of nonfatal serious violent crime at school and about 671,000 incidents away from school. In 1996, 5 percent of all 12th graders reported that they had been injured with a weapon such as a knife, gun, or club during the previous 12 months while they were at school, and another 12 percent reported that they had been injured on purpose without a weapon while at school. Additionally, in 1996-97, 10 percent of all public schools reported at least one serious violent crime to the police or a law enforcement representative. Furthermore, school principals also reported a number of serious violent crimes including murder, rape or other type of sexual battery,

suicide, physical attack or fight with a weapon, or robbery. Finally, 76 students were murdered or committed suicide at school during the combined 1992-93 and 1993-94 school years (the latest period for which this type of data is available).

Some additional data compiled by the U.S. Department of Education in 1996 concerning violence and security in public schools includes: 10 percent of all public schools experienced one or more serious violent crimes (i.e., murder, rape, suicide, physical attack or fight with a weapon) that were reported to police or other law enforcement officials; 45 percent of elementary schools, 74 percent of middle schools and 77 percent of high schools reported one or more violent incidents, and 78 percent of schools reported having some type of formal violence-prevention or violence-reduction program.

The U.S. Department of Education also broke these statistics out into categories; they include elementary schools, middle schools, and high schools. Elementary schools reported the following criminal incidents to the police: 1 percent reported rape/sexual battery; 1 percent reported robbery; 2 percent reported physical attack or fight with a weapon; 31 percent reported vandalism; 19 percent reported theft or larceny; and 12 percent reported physical attack or fight without a weapon. Middle school statistics include: 5 percent reported rape/sexual battery; 5 percent reported robbery; 12 percent reported physical attack or fight with a weapon; 47 percent reported vandalism; 44 percent reported theft or larceny; and 51 percent reported physical attack or fight without a weapon. High school statistics include: 8 percent reported rape/sexual battery; 8 percent reported robbery; 13 percent reported physical attack or fight with a weapon; 52 percent reported vandalism; 55 percent reported theft or larceny; and 55 percent reported physical attack or fight without a weapon.'

Additionally, in 1997, the Department of Education polled 1,234 regular public, elementary, middle, and secondary schools systems located throughout the United States and found that 18 percent of students polled reported carrying a weapon such as a knife, gun, or club at any time in the past 30 days. About 9 percent of the students polled reported that they had carried a weapon on school property in the past 30 days. Further, males were about three times more likely than females to carry a weapon on school property. Furthermore, students in lower grades were more likely to have carried a weapon anywhere in the previous 30 days than students in higher grades. Finally, some agencies estimate that over three million crimes occurred in schools during this time frame. One can see this figure is far beyond the reported and recorded figures.

Finally, *USA Weekend's* 13th Annual Teen Survey conducted in the Fall of 1999 questioned a total of 129,593 students in grades 6-12 and found that six

in ten students believed that it was possible that a violent event on the scale of Columbine could occur at their school. Further, one in five students stated they had felt afraid at school since the Coulmbine High School killings, with younger students and girls being the most fearful. One in four said they had been intentionally hit at school with nearly four in ten boys stating they had been struck. Seven in ten stated they would feel happier if schools were safer and more than half said they would learn more. Three in four reported that a glance, a slight, or bumping into people caused most conflicts at school. Nearly three in ten had been physically threatened. Eight in ten reported seeing a school fight and one in ten said students carry weapons at school. Nearly four in five had been robbed of something worth more than ten dollars at school and two in three students said there were cliques that were picked on. When asked for solutions, one in five students said that metal detectors would make schools safer, four in ten wanted bad kids sent away, and one in five wanted conflict resolution training.

The above statistics clarify why violence is a major concern to parents, students, teachers, and the administration of any school. These statistics are even more disconcerting when one considers the fact that many criminal acts are not reported due to the fact that some school administrators do not want the public to think they run a “bad school” or have “bad children.” For example, the author has been advised of more than one incident involving the discovery of firearms in school buildings which were not reported. Furthermore, school personnel may be reluctant to take actions against miscreants in their care because they believe that their is no such thing as a bad child or that it is their mission to straighten the student out. School staff may also fear a lawsuit if they take disciplinary action. Finally, teachers and staff may be fearful for their own and their families’ safety from student retaliation.

As a result of these statistics, there are a great number of proactive measures being developed and implemented to make the introduction of weapons into a school building as difficult as possible. Many of the valuable proactive measures include training teachers to identify troubled youths; counseling programs; students signing contracts to stop violence; students wearing ribbons to pledge support in stopping violence; installation of closed circuit television surveillance systems (CCTV), alarm systems, metal detectors and explosive device screeners; and the hiring of a police presence. Crisis response planning is integral to enhancing any school security effort. The best planning effort starts with prevention and awareness.

The above preventative measures are adopted to create a safe school environment. However, school administrators cannot count on these measures to completely prevent school violence unless security measures approach the level of a correctional system. Consider the fact that firearms

even find their way into correctional facilities. Further, school violence occurs in a unique context in every school and every situation making the adoption of any one proactive program impossible. Moreover, school communities can do everything recommended and still experience violence. “There is no single answer, no simple solution, and no guarantees.”

To reiterate, many proactive measures are sound; however, many school systems can do more to enhance school security. Any safety/security program is incomplete if an effective crisis response plan is not developed to deal with violence prevention program failure. Proactive measure failure has been demonstrated by the recent school shooting in Georgia. To refresh the reader’s memory, the school in Georgia had installed a new CCTV system and had hired a police presence. Neither of these concepts prevented the student (perpetrator) from entering the school with a firearm or stopped this individual from initiating his shooting spree.

Indeed, many proactive solutions can be effective; however, one of the most important proactive solutions concerns the development of a crisis response procedure. This plan is designed to provide school communities with reliable and practical information about what can be done to assist first responders in handling a school violence crisis. Focal points of concern include intervening during a crisis and responding in the aftermath of tragedy. A crisis response plan offers the most efficient path to effective rapid response operations assisting special response police forces, fire department personnel, medical aid personnel and ancillary support personnel saving the lives of hostages, students, teachers, support personnel, visitors, ancillary responders, police officers, and perpetrators. Additionally, these plans should reduce collateral damage typically generated by high threat operations. Further, response plans should also generate a detailed analysis valuable for formulating effective contingency plans. Finally, response programs will prove exceptionally valuable the more crisis situations change and the more chaotic the situation becomes.

One of the most common mistakes personnel make when developing crisis response programs is attempting to make a plan without sufficient information. Make no mistake, existing or projected natural emergency plans are not designed to accomplish this essential mission. Many school administrators believe existing or “tweaked” natural emergency plans are adequate response measures when firearms denial programs fail. Nothing could be further from the truth. The main point of the crisis response plan revolves around the principle of “Saving lives when all other proactive means have failed.” Crisis response plans should focus on the elements of rapid containment, area control, and the resecuring of the effected area. Remember, time equates to lives—the longer the perpetrators remain active, the higher the likelihood that additional people will be killed.

What parents want, and what the country demands is a solid plan to enhance school security. Crisis response plans must be site specific and designed to streamline the planning efforts of all emergency responders, heightening personnel survivability and mission success by reducing time-on-target mechanics prior to mission initiation. Indeed, time equals lives—the longer it takes law enforcement officials/emergency responders to act, the higher the likelihood will be that additional people will be killed. The incalculable costs of death, facility destruction, disruption of classes, negative public perception, civil/criminal lawsuits, and the resulting embarrassment of these acts easily exceed the time and cost of any crisis response plan development.

Indeed, school violence incidents have a unique impact on society which may be compounded in many ways. There may be additional fear generated for victims because they were chosen as a target for a specific purpose. Because the basis for attack is often due to their identity, victims may experience a deep personal crisis. Thus, victims may reject the aspect of themselves that was the target for their attack. Assumptions about life may be shattered forever. Terror may be exacerbated because society may be slow to respond in effective ways heightening feelings of vulnerability to repeat attack. Grief may be more intense because victims may lose their sense of community or feel betrayed by educational systems. School violence often appears to be senseless and random making explanations and forgiveness difficult. Students may become afraid to associate with other members of a group that has been targeted. The detrimental impact of school violence incidents necessitates the development of aggressive proactive measures.

In conclusion, for some schools violence may be a minor issue; for others it may be a daily presence. Though the most extreme forms of violence are rare, the threat of all kinds of violence can keep students away from school, prevent them from going to after-school events, and leave them in fear every day. Thus, educational entities can no longer afford the false assumption that “nothing has ever happened here and nothing ever will.” Indeed, it has come to the point where schools have to change their attitude about school violence. Many schools think they have a handle on this problem when they don’t. Most of the systems that have been put into place are inadequate at best. School administrators cannot simply rely on any existing or projected security/safety systems to completely prevent the introduction of a weapon into the school environment, nor can they expect to thwart all of the efforts of a violent student.

Crisis response plans designed to dovetail into external agency mission concepts are a mandatory life saving concept. Crisis response plans represent a vital part of the school safety trilogy (identification, intervention, and response). Indeed, the development of a crisis response program will demon-

strate to community organizations and individual citizens that school personnel and law enforcement entities are aware of security concerns and are proactively involved in addressing these issues. Further, students, educators, parents, law enforcement entities, and community members often feel secure as a result of a well-conceived plan. Finally, hopefully the information covered in this book will play a role in furthering efforts to protect America's children.

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EFFECTIVE RESPONSE TO SCHOOL VIOLENCE

Chapter 1

IDENTIFYING THE OFFENDER

Many citizens tend to believe that school violence is a spontaneous act; however, this is not the case. Students build up to their violent acts and behaviors; they display signs and show a preponderance toward this behavior. Indeed, violent youngsters continue to plague America. The Southern Poverty Law Center, in their publication, "The Intelligence Report," found that the arrests of juveniles for violent crimes skyrocketed 79 percent between 1987 and 1994 (a period in which the population of juveniles in the United States rose only 7 percent. To this day, arrest rates are still well above the levels of the 1980s. Crimes committed by those under 18 years old also are more violent in the 1990s than they were earlier, with young people accounting for larger percentages of all murders, rapes, robberies and aggravated assaults than in the 1980s.

Agents in the Secret Service's National Threat Assessment Center have been researching 40 incidences of school violence and released a report to schools in the fall of 2000 on how to detect potentially violent students. Agents have found that predators are vague by the nature of individual differences. Furthermore, agents have discovered attacks are often preceded by violent comments and are usually planned rather than spontaneous.

It is more important than ever for teachers, educational professionals, and

other school officials to be trained to recognize students at risk of perpetuating violent behavior and initiate intervention programs when applicable. The goal is to identify the troubled student and then intervene by using proper support systems. Indeed, an act of violence can be prevented, but it rarely, if ever, can be predicted. Thus, it is vital for school systems to also prepare crisis action plans in the event a troubled student is not identified or intervention efforts fail.

Early Warning Signs

These enumerated early warning signs are presented with the following qualifications: they are not all inclusive, equally significant, or presented in order of seriousness. The following are some warning signs (researched by the Behavioral Science Unit of the FBI, the Department of Education, and the Department of Justice) a student may display or be subjected to which may precede a potentially lethal act:

1. A history of violence.
2. A close family member has committed a violent act.
3. A history of alcohol or drug abuse.
4. A precipitating event such as a failed romance or the perception of a failed romance.
5. Availability of a weapon or the means to commit violence.
6. Recent attempts to commit suicide or

- violence.
7. A lack of coping skills or strategies to handle personal life crisis.
 8. A lack of inhibition to display anger or the absence of a positive way of releasing anger.
 9. No apparent support system.
 10. Indications of low self-esteem.
 11. Previous acts of cruelty to animals.
 12. Fire setting.
 13. Bed-wetting beyond a normal age.
 14. Being abusive to adults.
 15. A fascination with firearms.
 16. Lack of discipline.
 17. Possessing a narcissistic view or favorable views about self.
 18. Feeling rejected, persecuted, or picked on.
 19. Perception of being different from others and the dislike of those who are different.
 20. Appears to be a loner.
 21. Appears to be an average student.
 22. Appears sloppy or unkempt in dress.
 23. May be influenced or used by manipulative students.
 24. May have a history of mental health treatment.
 25. May have a propensity to dislike popular students or students who bully others.
 26. May have expressed interest in previous incidents of killings.
 27. May have felt powerless and always perceives self as being the victim.
 28. May have openly expressed a desire to kill others.
 29. Expression of violence in writings and drawings.
 30. Shows a lack of interest in school.
 31. Displays an absence of age-appropriate anger control skills.
 32. Demonstrates a persistent disregard for or refusal to follow rules.
 33. Talks constantly about weapons or violence and/or is obsessed with things like violent games and TV shows.
 34. Displays signs of depression or mood swings.
 35. Talks about bringing weapons to school.
 36. Has a history of bullying. Some studies show that one in four children who bully will have a criminal record before the age of thirty. Bullies often have a small group of children (a pseudo gang) who follow them around. They are a type of violent leader, are outgoing, manipulative, and instigate fights.
 37. Displays misplaced or unwarranted jealousy.
 38. Is involved or interested in gangs.
 39. May be socially inept and tend to be out of the norm or out of the mainstream of the school population.

Early Warning Sign Misinterpretation

Remember, early warning signs may or may not indicate a serious problem. These signs do not necessarily mean that a child is prone to violence toward self or others. Rather, early warning signs provide an impetus to check out concerns and address the child's needs. Early warning signs allow school communities to act responsibly by getting help for the child before problems escalate. However, it is important to avoid inappropriately labeling, stigmatizing, or profiling an individual student because he or she appears to fit a specific profile or set of early warning indicators. **Note:** Suspect profiling is being challenged in the legal systems as this book is being written. Results and civil penalties are pending.

A good rule of thumb to follow is to assume that warning signs, especially when present in a cumulative fashion, indicate a need for further analysis in order to deter-

mine an appropriate intervention response. Indeed, the more signs that are identified, the greater the chance that the child needs help. When a number of these signs are observed, the educational professional should start background checks and notify the appropriate support personnel.

Unfortunately, there is a real danger that early warning signs may be misinterpreted. Indeed, overreaction and the jumping to conclusions will likely prove counterproductive. Thus, educators should apply the following principles to avoid the misinterpretation of warning signs: do no harm; understand violence and aggression within a context; avoid stereotypes; view warning signs within a developmental context; and finally, understand that children typically exhibit multiple warning signs. It must be reiterated that while an act of violence may be prevented, it rarely can be predicted. Indeed, predicting violent behavior is very difficult due to all of the human variables involved.

In conclusion, it is inappropriate and potentially harmful to use early warning signs as a checklist against which to match individual children. Early warning signs should be used as an aid in identifying and referring children who may need help to support systems. Thus, school communities must ensure that staff members and students relegate early warning signs to identification and referral purposes. Finally, only trained professionals should make diagnosis in consultation with the child's parents or guardian.

Imminent Warning Signs

Unlike early warning signs, imminent warning signs indicate that a student is very close to behaving in a way that is potentially dangerous to self and/or others. Typically, the student's aggressive behavior will be

viewed as "out of control." In orthodox psychiatric terms, anger and resulting aggressive behavior originate within a small child when basic needs or drives are not met. The anger each person feels in the present is said to be founded in past angers and disappointments originating within their families and individual life experiences. Aggression explodes when anger grows great and individuals do not possess strong enough internal defenses (anger management skills) to control it.

Indeed, some students may believe that aggression and violent behavior are their only choice. Chances are this student learned this lesson at home. Parents may teach their children to be violent by example and by exhortation. Violence is taught and reinforced when parents are violent with each other and with their children. Some parents may openly and deliberately teach their children to resolve disputes with other children through the use of brute force. For example: these parents routinely threaten to punish their children for not fighting; advise their children on how to fight; label not fighting as babyish and/or unmasculine; and these parents may allow fights to continue long after other parents would have intervened. The result of this parental indoctrination to aggression and violent behavior may result in the creation of children who do not know how to cope with angry feelings in ways that are not violent. Indeed, these students may harbor no faith that aggression and violence can be prevented. Finally, children may be quick to choose violent aggression, if in the past, they themselves have been the subject of someone else's rage.

Further, males are typically more violent than females and many chemical substances, for example, alcohol, PCP, methamphetamine, and cocaine, etc., have been associated with aggression. There are a number

of studies and theories associated with the use of these chemicals and aggression. These theories show a strong association between the above-listed chemical substances and subsequent displays of aggression and violent acts.

Perhaps the age group most prone to committing violent acts is the 12-20-year-old individual. From a developmental standpoint, a certain attraction to violence is seen by many mental health experts as a normal trait. For example, the insecurity the 12-20 year old feels feeds their needs to take risks, heightens their energy level, generates a sense of invincibility, and may propel them toward behavior many adults might label as foolhardy. However, students displaying imminent warning signs often represent a more serious condition. For example, these students may experience non-specific feelings of anger which are easy to ignite. Indeed, any small provocation may cause an eruption of aggressive feelings, causing the individual to strike out at the nearest target.

The above age group represents a period of life requiring a great deal of adjustment. Almost nothing stays constant, a world once viewed as simple has suddenly grown into a complex environment. Some of these changes include body growth, sexual interest, emotions, ideas, gender identification, relationships, etc. As a result of these changes, students often see themselves as persons separated from their parents and siblings, search for independent identities, learn to think for themselves, and make decisions for themselves. For many teenagers and their parents, the adolescent years are filled with intense emotional struggle.

The kindness most adults show small children is often withdrawn from teenage boys whose challenging attitude toward authority and growing physical prowess may be seen as threatening by men and frighten-

ing to women. Fathers, teachers, principles, police officers, and other authority figures may feel compelled to show young males who is boss or desire to "teach them a lesson." Experimenting and risk-taking are a normal part of adolescence as the student adopts new styles, new personalities, new opinions, new friendships, and new romances.

Adolescents may display an inflated self-confidence, tend to overestimate their own talents, and underestimate the risks that await them. Adolescents may feel a need to prove themselves by fighting to protect a mother's honor, a girlfriend's fidelity, or to build a reputation. The problem is magnified when weapons are used in lieu of fighting. Of course, not all young men are equal in jeopardy, some are more at risk than others. For example, what father figures teach adolescent's can be negative; for example, drinking, drugs, illegal activity, fighting, and domestic violence. Thus, many mental health experts believe that aggressive, anti-social adolescents are not born, they are slowly made over many years.

Imminent warning signs usually are presented as a sequence of overt, serious, hostile behaviors or threats directed at peers, school staff, or other individuals. Imminent warning signs may include the following:

1. Serious physical fighting with peers or family members. If fighting continues from the early years into the elementary school years, there is a likelihood of continued violence. Most fighters are said to be identifiable by the age of eight or nine. Fights in school are often categorized as fights over territory, game rules, toys, playground equipment, and for retaliation.
2. Severe destruction of property.
3. Severe rage for seemingly minor reasons.
4. Detailed threats of lethal violence.