

Campus Violence: Lessons from the Cases

Dianne R. Layden

Central New Mexico Community College

A 2001 study of 300 undergraduates at a college near Philadelphia revealed that 60% of males and 32% of females “harbored recent homicidal fantasies. Most said they got their inspiration for murder using firearms and a wide variety of alternative weapons from TV shows, movies, news broadcasts, and popular songs” (Joseph Lieberman, *The Shooting Game: The Making of School Shooters*, p. 73).

“It seems like every month some ‘dumb-ass’ walks into a school and starts shooting children” (Lynette Scavo, “Desperate Housewives”).

Violence on Campus

Since the 1990s, there has been a spate of shootings at educational institutions across the United States and in other countries. “It was not until 1992 that the label ‘school violence’ itself was used widely as a term to describe violent and aggressive acts on school campuses” (Furlong and Morrison, p. 5). A 2005 survey of high school students found 19 percent had carried a weapon in the past 30 days, up slightly from 17 percent in 1999, but well below 26 percent in 1991 (“Students”). This article will provide an overview of campus violence – incidence, factors, and responses. The term campus violence refers to violence at all levels of education.

The public is fearful of campus violence. A 1999 NBC/*Wall Street Journal* poll found 71 percent of respondents thought school shootings were likely in their communities, although the chance of being killed at a school is one in two million and juvenile crimes of violence fell in the 1990s, according to the Federal Bureau of Investigation (Center). In 2004, the violent crime rate on college campuses was 62 per 100,000 students, while the national rate was 466 per 100,000 residents (Lipka). Campus shootings may be likened to airplane crashes – they occur infrequently, but terrify people when they do. The institution will never be the same and will be subjected to public scrutiny for years to come.

Dewey Cornell, Director of the Virginia Youth Violence Project at the University of Virginia, has observed, “Unfortunately, there is implied cultural support for the idea of going on a rampage to express your feelings” (Cornell, “School”). Two widely publicized incidents occurred at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, in April 1999, and Virginia Tech University in Blacksburg, Virginia, in April 2007. Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris killed 13 people at Columbine, including a teacher, wounded 24 people, and committed suicide. Klebold and Harris were iconic figures to Seung-Hui Cho at Virginia Tech, who is responsible for the worst mass shooting in U.S. history; Cho killed 32 students and faculty members, wounded at least 26 people, and committed suicide.

Cho, too, has become an iconic figure. In April 2008, 20-year-old Calin Chi Wong of Homestead, Florida, near Miami, threatened to recreate the Virginia Tech killings in an email conversation that was posted on a Web site for gun enthusiasts; he was arrested and charged with making threats over the Internet (Kennedy). Wong amassed a weapons cache of 13 firearms, including several AK-47s, and thousands of rounds of ammunition (Kennedy). The “copycat” phenomenon is associated with workplace homicides as well.

The Virginia Tech shootings resulted in a June 2008 settlement that provided payments by the university “of up to \$100,000 to the victims and their families, medical care for the injured, improved

campus safety programs and the creation of a public archive of records about the attack” (Miroff). The settlement also included an agreement by the university to hold meetings with the victims’ families, which were held in October 2008 (Miroff). The disclosure of controversial new details of the shootings and displeasure with Virginia Tech expressed by some family members revealed the long-term impact of campus violence on the community (Ress).

Other Public Shootings

Recent campus homicides are reminiscent of the spate of workplace homicides in the 1990s. The number fell 44 percent from a peak of 1,080 in 1994 to, according to preliminary data, 610 in 2007, of a total of 5,488 fatal workplace injuries in 2007 (11 percent); notably, the 610 homicides represented a 13 percent increase from a series low in 2006 of 540 workplace homicides (U.S. Department of Labor, “National”; U.S. Department of Labor, “Workplace”).¹ Yet three workplace homicides occurred on April 1, 2008 – in Louisburg, North Carolina, two people died and one was injured in a possible domestic-violence shooting; in Chester, Virginia, one person died following an argument with a co-worker in the parking lot during a shift change; and in Boston, Massachusetts, a man committed suicide after killing his co-worker (“3”). Public mass murders also have taken place at shopping malls, restaurants, churches, city halls, and courthouses.

One study of workplace shootings found a common scenario: The shooter suffers a trauma, either a single major event or cumulative minor events, that creates extreme tension or anxiety, perceives the problem as unsolvable, projects all responsibility onto the situation, becomes increasingly egocentric in frame of reference, adopts self-preservation and self-protection as sole objectives, perceives a violent act as the only way out, and attempts or commits the violent act (Kinney and Johnson, p. 31).

Incidence of Campus Violence

The National Center for Educational Statistics of the U.S. Department of Education provides data for various years regarding numbers of and enrollments in educational institutions (“Fast Facts”; Knapp, et al., p. A-3).

- 97,000: Number of public elementary and secondary schools (2005-2006)
- 28,000: Number of private elementary and secondary schools (2003-2004)
- 3,300: Estimated number of charter schools (2004-2005)
- 6,674: Number of postsecondary institutions that provide academic, vocational, and continuing professional education programs, excluding those that offer only leisure and adult basic education programs, and including 4,389 degree-granting institutions (2006-2007)
- 49.6 million: Estimated number of students enrolled in public elementary and secondary schools (2007-2008)
- 6.1 million: Estimated number of students enrolled in private elementary and secondary schools (2007-2008)
- 887,000: Number of students who attended charter schools (2004-2005)
- 1.1 million: Number of students who were homeschooled (2003 school year)
- 18 million: Projected number of 2-year and 4-year college students, part-time and full-time (2007-2008)

Two sources of incidence data are the Web site *www.Columbine-Angels.com*, created by Alan Lampe following the Columbine shootings, and the School Associated Violent Deaths (SAVD) study co-sponsored by the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Department of Education, and Department of Justice. Both sources rely on news coverage, which may be inaccurate or incomplete; the SAVD study has additional limitations, but includes an interview with at least one law enforcement official or school official who was familiar with the case. More violent incidents undoubtedly have occurred, but were not covered by the press or, if covered locally, not distributed to other news sources. In summary, researchers lack complete data with which to analyze the number, kinds, and circumstances of violent incidents in terms of the numbers of institutions and students enrolled at each level. Thus, findings are speculative.

Lampe's Web site contains perhaps the largest collection of campus violence incidents, including homicides – this author counted 1,647 incidents between 1927 and July 2007. In general, pre-schools appeared to have experienced less than 1 percent; elementary schools, 13 percent; middle schools, 16 percent; high schools, 62 percent, the highest proportion; community colleges, less than 1 percent; and colleges and universities, 5 percent.

The SAVD study tallied school homicides (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services). Multi-victim homicides increased in the 1990s, but homicides overall decreased in 1992-2006 and stabilized in 1999-2006, when 116 students were killed. School homicides represent only about 1 percent of homicides among school-age youth. In 2001-2005, according to Fox, 76 homicides were reported at American colleges (Fox, "Commentary").

Factors in School Shootings

In a study of 25 school shootings, Katharine Newman, et al., found a combination of five factors was present – the shooter's perception of self as marginal in the social worlds that matter; psychosocial problems that magnify the marginality; cultural prescriptions for behavior that lead the way toward an armed attack, i.e., a belief that unleashing an attack on teachers and classmates would resolve the shooter's dilemma; failure of surveillance systems intended to identify troubled teens before problems become extreme; and gun availability. Among the 25 cases, the targets are random in some and specific in others. Newman, et al., concluded that school shootings represent an attack on the school as an institution.

The U.S. Secret Service and U.S. Department of Education conducted a study, the Safe School Initiative, of 37 incidents of targeted school violence, which may be defined as a violent incident in which a known or knowable attacker selects a particular target prior to the attack (Vossekuil, et. al., p. 4). Ten key findings are as follows (pp. 11-12):

- Incidents of targeted violence at schools rarely were sudden, impulsive attacks.
- Prior to most incidents, other people knew about the attacker's idea and/or plan to attack.
- Most attackers did not threaten their targets directly prior to the attack.
- There is no accurate or useful 'profile' of students who engaged in targeted school violence.
- Most attackers engaged in some behavior prior to the incident that caused others concern or indicated a need for help.
- Most attackers had difficulty coping with significant losses or personal failures. Moreover, many had considered or attempted suicide.
- Many attackers felt bullied, persecuted or injured by others prior to the attack.
- Most attackers had access to and had used weapons prior to the attack.
- In many cases, other students were involved in some capacity.
- Despite prompt law enforcement responses, most shooting incidents were stopped by means other than law enforcement intervention.

Responses to Campus Violence

To promote campus safety, the CDC recommended that schools attempt to prevent behaviors that often precede fatal violence, such as bullying, suicidal ideation, and threats and other warning signs, and that society adopt comprehensive approaches that address risk factors for violence at the individual, family, school, and community levels (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services). According to Cornell, studies demonstrate that school violence can be prevented (see, generally, Cornell, *School*, pp. 123-144). Examples of such programs are:

- School-based: Conflict resolution training, peer mediation
- Community-based: Mentoring, supervised recreational programs
- Family-focused: Parent education, family therapy

At least 17 states have passed legislation that requires schools to address bullying, and thousands of schools have implemented prevention programs (see, generally, Cornell, *School*, pp. 77-96).

Fox expressed concern that prospective students would choose a college or university based on safety over academic quality, range of majors, and quality of social life (Fox, "Topics").² He cautioned higher education about efforts to lock down a campus, which may not be possible since shootings occur in specific locations; costs of additional security; absence of warning signs in some cases; and, when signs are present, impossibility of efforts to identify and coerce troubled students into treatment, which could precipitate violent acts. A 2008 *Reader's Digest* survey of 135 colleges found over 90 percent had installed mass notification systems, over 50 percent had plans for lockdowns, and 48 percent authorized use of firearms by campus police officers ("Reader's"). To Fox, the most important change has been greater emphasis on mental health services, as evidenced by increasing budgets and number of personnel (Fox, "Topics").

An analysis of school violence prevention practices was conducted of data reported by principals in the 2003-2004 School Survey on Crime and Safety, which is administered by the National Center for Education Statistics of the U.S. Department of Education ("Public"). Selected key findings in the area of safety and security are:

- Security officers or police present on a regular basis 45%
- Use of one or more security cameras to monitor the school 36%
- Random sweeps for contraband conducted 13%
- Random metal detector tests conducted on students 6%

A survey of college campuses by the U.S. Justice Department for the 2004-2005 academic year concluded that their law enforcement agencies are better prepared and equipped now than they were a decade ago, reflecting a continuing trend toward professionalization of campus security officers (Lipka). Nearly all agencies surveyed, 94 percent, had written emergency-preparedness plans, although only 58 percent conducted related exercises in 2004-2005.

In June 2008, the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence reported that efforts by the gun lobby to force colleges and universities to allow loaded and hidden handguns on campus were rejected by 15 state legislatures, with measures still pending in two states, neither of which has shown interest to date; only Utah has passed such a law ("Guns-On-Campus"). With 90 guns for every 100 citizens, the U.S. is said to be the most heavily armed society in the world, according to a 2007 report by the Graduate Institute of International Studies in Geneva, Switzerland (MacInnis).³ U.S. citizens own 270 million of the world's 875 million known firearms and purchase about 4.5 million of the eight million new guns manufactured worldwide each year. Per capita, the next most heavily armed citizenries were in Yemen (61 guns per 100 people), Finland (56), Switzerland (46), Iraq (39), and Serbia (38). The next largest civilian gun arsenals were in India (46 million guns) and China (40 million guns). In the U.S., "[c]urrently, an estimated 34.5% of households have a gun, while 24% have a handgun" (citations omitted) ("Firearm"). In June 2008, in *District of Columbia vs. Heller*, the U.S. Supreme Court upheld an individual right to own a gun for personal use in one's home (Greenhouse).

Yell and Rozalski summarized federal, state, and local government campus violence prevention laws and policies, which include gun regulation; "zero-tolerance" policies that require automatic punishment for rule violations, regardless of the circumstances; searches of students and their property; use of metal detectors and surveillance cameras; and provision of educational programs. The federal Gun-Free Schools Act of 1994, for example, requires schools to expel for no less than one year any student who brings a gun to school, subject to loss of federal funding; all 50 states soon passed legislation that meet federal requirements (p. 161). Also, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 requires schools to have safety plans, fund violence prevention programs and practices, and report to the public on school-by-school safety, among other campus safety provisions ("Public"). According to Cornell, relatively little information on college crime was available until Congress passed the Clery Act of 1998, which requires colleges to publish annual campus crime statistics, excluding larceny, theft, vandalism, threats, and harassment (Cornell, "College"). The Family Educational and Privacy Rights Act of 1999 regulates confidentiality of student records, which may include psychological evaluations (Bailey, p. 44).

According to Devine and Lawson, the most notable trend in U.S. school violence prevention, as compared to other countries, is the national focus on “crisis preparedness” (p. 342). Following the September 11, 2001, attacks on the Twin Towers in New York City and the Pentagon in Washington, D.C., President George W. Bush’s administration asked all schools to review their crisis plans, including school shootings, suicides and large-scale disasters such as the terrorism of September 11. Schools are exhorted to have a professional security assessment and to work with police, fire and emergency services to develop joint plans. Grants are going to business firms specializing in ‘school security assessments’ that may include reviewing a school’s ‘crisis preparedness plan[,]’ . . . security guard and school police staffing patterns and training, physical security measures and the like. Funds are available for acquiring metal detectors, electronic locks, surveillance cameras, and other related equipment and technology (Devine and Lawson, p. 342).

Federal and state courts also have addressed campus violence. U.S. Supreme Court decisions, for example, have both upheld constitutional rights of public school students to be free of unreasonable searches and seizures, and to have a reasonable expectation of privacy, as well as the duty of schools to provide safe and orderly environments in which learning can take place, with the latter taking precedence when rights of students and school officials seem to conflict (Yell and Rozalski, p. 164).

Threat Assessment of Violence Risk

Historically, studies of human “dangerousness,” which generally focused on psychiatric patients or criminal offenders, found predictions of violence were not reliable; for example, for institutionalized psychiatric patients, the accuracy rate was only 30 percent, the highest among groups studied (Otto). In recent years, there has been a shift in thinking from dangerousness to risk: “Dangerousness is a subjective concept of a stable and consistent quality existing within individuals. Risk, on the other hand, is not a static personality trait, but a combination of factors, each of which are not necessarily dangerous in themselves, which fluctuate over time, and which may be modified or managed” (Sheldrick, p. 107). The focus of risk assessment is prevention, not prediction. According to Borum, “very little data are available concerning the accuracy of risk assessment predictions among juveniles” (p. 1266). A statistical study of campus shootings is stymied because such shootings are rare events and the base rate is too small for analysis (See, generally, Reddy, et al.). Workplace shootings fall into the same category (see, for example, Monahan).⁴

Borum and his colleagues have written extensively about promise of the threat assessment approach to targeted campus violence (see, for example, Borum; Borum, et al.; Randazzo, et al., and Borum and Verhaagen). Threat assessment primarily was developed by the U.S. Secret Service to aid in preventing assassinations of U.S. and foreign leaders (Borum, p. 1278). The term refers to “the fact-based method of assessing the risk posed by an individual who has engaged in some communication or behavior of concern that has brought [the individual] to official attention. Often this may follow an explicit threat or indicators of potential targeted violence....” (Borum, p. 1278). Three basic principles are: Targeted violence results from an understandable and often discernible process of thinking and behavior; violence stems from an interaction among the potential attacker, past stressful events, a current situation, and the target; and the central question is whether the student poses a threat, not whether the student has made a threat (Borum and Verhaagen, pp. 107-108). At a Congressional hearing on campus safety, Cornell asserted that threat assessment can be used both in K-12 schools and higher education, noting that although it is easier to monitor and supervise a high school student than a college student, threat assessment can be used in colleges and universities as it is used in business and industry to prevent workplace violence (“Statement”).

The Virginia Youth Violence Project has developed and field-tested a comprehensive set of threat assessment guidelines over the course of one year in 35 socioeconomically and ethnically diverse schools in central Virginia that enrolled 16,400 students, including four high schools, six middle schools, 22 elementary schools, and three alternative schools (see, generally, Cornell, et al.). Multidisciplinary threat assessment teams composed of a school administrator, psychologist or counselor, and law enforcement officer dealt with a total of 188 student threats, as follows:

- To hit or beat up someone 77 (41%)

- To cut or stab (10%)
- To shoot 24 (13%)
- To kill 27 (14%)
- Vague or non-specific, e.g., “I’m going to get you” 32 (17%)
- Miscellaneous, e.g., setting fires or detonating bombs 10 (5%)

The threat assessment approach provided the schools greater flexibility in choosing disciplinary consequences based on the seriousness of the threat than zero-tolerance policies, which would have required expulsion. Only three students were expelled – 94 were given a short-term suspension, 12 were placed in alternative educational settings, and six were arrested; the remaining 73 were not disciplined (see also, generally, Mohandie).

Campus Violence: Complex Social Phenomenon

In summary, campus violence is a complex social phenomenon that involves violence in American culture; gun availability; “copycat” behavior following campus shootings; access to mental health services; public policy and legal considerations; violence prevention programs, including threat assessment; and impact on campus climate of security technology, such as cameras, metal detectors, and “tip lines” – telephone numbers for reporting suspicious behavior –about which research should be conducted. Crisis management and workplace violence prevention models view collaboration through a multidisciplinary approach as highly effective in crisis decision-making (see, for example, Barton, pp. 53-54, 282-284). Applying these models, campus threat assessment and crisis management teams should include administrators, faculty, and mental health, security, human resources, and legal professionals. These teams will need training and perhaps outside expertise on threat assessment.

The rarity of campus homicides and resulting difficulty in predicting campus violence, Wilson observed, raise two questions for educators, security professionals, and researchers. First, which should be the priority in allocating the scarce resources of educational institutions – prevention strategies, such as identification of threats and intervention, or post-incident strategies, such as mass notification systems and lockdowns, which were adopted in response to the Virginia Tech shootings? Second, did the number of workplace homicides drop between 1994 and 2006 because the phenomenon had run its course or because of the success of workplace violence prevention policies and programs, such as threat identification and intervention, that were adopted in the 1990s? Employers responded to the rise in workplace homicides, for example, with zero tolerance policies on violence, improved mental health services through employee assistance programs, and creation of multi-disciplinary threat assessment teams, among other strategies.

According to Wilson, schools have been slow to create threat assessment teams, “and there is little in the way of literature or standardized and reproducible protocols and procedures.” Following the Columbine shootings, schools made improvements in campus safety, but not a full commitment: “. . . [T]he tragedy at Virginia Tech offered a window of opportunity to infuse schools with resources and training needed to formalize a comprehensive approach to school violence prevention and response” (Wilson). Wilson perceived this window as closing and called for model practices and programs for implementation now, followed by rigorous academic research on their utility.

Realistically, despite our best efforts, it is impossible to provide students with complete and utter protection from harm. Still, we can look to prevention programs to reduce the risk of campus violence, such as the threat assessment program tested in the schools by Cornell, et al., and workplace violence prevention programs that have been adapted for use in colleges and universities. We can also hope that the recent spate of campus homicides, like workplace homicides, will soon run its course.

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Footnotes

- ¹Workplace homicides typically occur in the course of robberies. Homicide data for 2006 include 199 suicides, an 11 percent increase from 180 suicides in 2005 (Erickson and Erickson).
- ² See, for example, Antinozzi and Axelrod, *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Campus Safety*, 2008, which has chapters entitled "Scoping Out Schools: Shopping for a Safety-Conscious Campus," "Disturbing People, Dangerous People: Identifying the Threats and What to Do About Them," and "Defending Your Life: The Basics of Self-Defense."
- ³ Of 30,694 firearm deaths in 2005, according to the CDC, 55 percent were suicides, 40 percent were homicides, 3 percent were accidents, and 2 percent included legal killings – when police do the shootings, for example, excluding executions – and cases in which the intent was undetermined (Kung, et al., p. 78).
- ⁴ Meloy addressed the problem of base rate: "In the most violent populations, violence base rates generally do not exceed 30% per year. This means that most violent individuals are not violent most of the time. This poses a problem for assessing risk, because when base rates drop below 50%, the likelihood is that the behavior will not occur; and the lower the base rate goes (such as 9:100,000), the greater the likelihood that the behavior will not be able to be predicted at all, and furthermore, there will be a large overprediction of the behavior if it is attempted (what is technically called a false positive....)" (p. 7).

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