

## **The Impact of School Violence in America**

**Ie May Freeman, Ed.D.**

Associate Professor

School of Education

Azusa Pacific University

USA

### **Abstract**

This article serves to explain the history and impact of school violence in America from the 1920s to 2000s. Embedded in this research are public schools and universities that have faced the countless loss of lives at the hands of young men who carry out their plans to commit such atrocities. Included in this research are the motivations, rationale behind school violence and school violence policies. The article concludes with recommendations to curtail school violence around America. It is the hope that the knowledge from this research will prepare educators, administrators, districts to understand about school violence and how measures can be implemented in order to reduce the incidences that occur in schools.

### **History of School Violence**

In this article, school violence is defined as violent and aggressive acts committed on school campuses (Furlong & Morrison, 2000). School violence can include behaviors that can result in either physical, emotional or psychological injury. These behaviors are acts that create a climate where students, faculty, staff and or teachers feel fear, distrust or intimidation. Youth might become victims of physical assault, injury, theft, or vandalism.

School violence affects all of society in that those who are affected are left wounded with scars or killed. The first known accounts of school violence in America date back to 1927. In 1927, one of the worst school tragedies occurred in United States (Uphoff, 1999). During this year, it was reported that 38 students and five adults were killed by a man named Andrew Kehoe at a school site (Hoffman, 1999). Andrew Kehoe set off dynamite in a schoolhouse in Bath, Michigan, before killing himself (Hoffman, 1999).

Between 1950 and 1975, American schools experienced additional types of school violence including fights that took place on campuses. In response to school violence, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention announced a national initiative to combat school crime (Toby, 1998). The plan was based on a social development model, which focused on having youth reach out to different units. According to Hawkins and Weis (1985) these units include four types of units which affect family, schools, peers, and community members in a positive way. It was believed that bonding with these units would help youth develop necessary skills to promote positive thought and behavior (Toby, 1998). The goal of building these influential units is to create positive relationships among all stakeholders such as teachers, parents, administrators, and students. This can include addressing social emotional learning, practicing mindfulness, daily check-ins, journaling, and introducing Restorative Justice into the school systems. When this begins, there may be a tendency to not commit acts of crime or violence in the school system.

The nature of school violence has changed in time. It was found that more lethal types of school violence occurring on school campuses in the 1990s (Thomas, 2005). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (1998) there are two types of school violence which includes crime and violent deaths at school sites. There has been a tremendous increase in lethal school violence in America. School shootings resulting in mass homicide were becoming all too familiar. According to Picone (2003), many states such as Washington, Mississippi, Kentucky, Arkansas, Tennessee, Oregon, Oklahoma, Virginia, Colorado, and California experienced this continuing issue.

Because of this, physicians and public health officials began to investigate weapon possession through a study called Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance Survey (YRBS). According to Furlong and Morrison (2000), it was noted that 9.3% of all students in Grades 9-12 carried a weapon on school property at least once during the preceding month. Furlong and Morrison (2000) reported that males (14.8%) were more likely to carry a weapon to school than females (5.1%).

From 1980-1994 there was a tremendous increase in violent crimes in America committed by 14 to 24-year-olds. According to Boulter (2004), the rate of violent acts in schools included murder, theft, aggravated assault, and forcible rape which rose by 168%. It was found that most of these crimes were committed by males, who also had a higher rate of being victims of school violence (Boulter, 2004).

School violence has taken a toll on young children, parents, teachers, and communities as a whole. According to Dresser (1994), The National School Board Association found that out of 720 school districts surveyed, 82% reported an increase in violence from 1990-1995. Acts of school violence have prompted much discussion and research on developing safer schools across America. In October of each academic year, schools around the nation observe America's Safe Schools Week. According to the National School Safety Center (2009), this annual observance encourages local, state, and national public school organizations to promote non-violence. The first recommendation is to incorporate safety topics into the curriculum. The second is to develop safety policies. The third is to initiate programs to promote student responsibility for safer schools. The fourth recommendation is to purchase conflict resolution curricular materials to provide staff and student training in solving problems and conflicts. Lastly, the National Safety Center strives to create and publicize safety incentive programs on vandalism prevention.

Schools in America are attempting to create a more positive environment in which students can learn and feel safe. Society accepts the role of schools as being important to the integrity of society (Jones, 1999). For this reason, many parents, grandparents or caretakers look to schools for assistance in the educational and social development of their children. Schools are seen as a place whereby safety, emotional well-being and trust is formed. Uphoff (1999) believes in his research that schools are safe places. Uphoff (1999) views that schools are now depicted as places of violence. They are a place where every month there is some form of shootings that are occurring across public schools or universities. It was reported that more than 300 students, teachers, and others have died in violent acts on American school campuses since 1990 (National School Safety Center, 1998). According to Olson (2006) the majority of the deaths involved disagreements between students and students, students and teachers, gang violence, and suicides. This number has increased across the years as deaths are now related to gunshot wounds caused not by gang members but sole males in pursuit of their own selfish interests.

### **21<sup>st</sup> Century School Violence**

Twenty years ago, on April 20, 1999, twelve students and one teacher were killed by two students who attended Columbine High School. The students were Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris who carried guns and bombs into Columbine. The two students eventually took their own lives before wounding 23 people and killing 13 (CNN, 2019). This was considered one of the "worst high school shooting in United States history" (History.com, 2019, p.1). Investigations showed that the two teenagers randomly selected their victims and did not specifically target minorities, Christians or athletes (History.com, 2019).

There were various reasons why the two adolescents decided to commit the killings at Columbine High School. The first reason was because they were social outcasts who joined a group called the Trenchcoat Mafia who were fascinated by the Gothic culture (History.com, 2019). The second reason was because they wanted to carry out the shootings in revenge for being bullied during their school years (History.com, 2019). The last reason was due to playing violent video games and music that influenced them to kill others (History.com, 2019). It is important to understand that these three theories have not been proven in the years following this school shooting incident. What is definitely certain is that before committing the killings both of them left behind a journal. The journal stated how they planned to bring a bomb to school and attack students for almost a year (History.com, 2019).

The actions conducted by Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris resulted in zero-tolerance policies throughout public schools in America. Zero tolerance are school discipline policies and practices designed to help improve student behavior and school safety. This means that there is no tolerance for bringing weapons like guns, pocket knives, bombs, swords, alcohol or drugs on campus.

It also includes no tolerance for fighting and showing disrespect towards a teacher or school personnel. Violating zero-tolerance policies could lead to disciplinary action such as suspension or expulsion from a school site.

Another one of the most devastating school killings in U.S. history took place at Virginia Tech University (Zerbisias, 2007). Seung-Hui Cho, a 23-year-old senior, was responsible for killing 27 college students; five faculty members were also killed before he took his own life (Cox, 2007). This incident was considered one of the worst massacres in U.S. history (Serrano & Zucchini, 2007). Cox (2007) reported that Seung-Hui Cho of Virginia Tech was unrecognized by his classmates, but he ended up as a threat due to his emotional instability. Students at Virginia Tech reported him as a loner who kept to himself and had a history of mental-health problems (History.com, 2019). His professors were concerned about his angry and violent writings in certain assignments given at Virginia Tech (History.com, 2019). It was reported that Seung-Hui Cho received outpatient care at a mental health facility for making suicidal comments to his roommates in 2005 (CNN, 2019).

Additionally, an act of school violence occurred at Sandy Hook elementary school on December 15, 2012. This was considered one of the deadliest school shootings in United States History (Kranz & Harrington, 2018). The incident occurred in Newtown, Connecticut. Adam Lanza a 20-year-old man, walked into the school and killed 26 people before turning the gun on himself. Of the 26 people killed, 20 were children and six were staff members. Like Seung-Hui Cho, Adam Lanza had a history of mental health concerns such as depression, anxiety and obsessive-compulsive disorder (Katersky & Kim, 2014).

A more recent school violence occurred at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida. In less than six minutes, 20-year-old Nikolas Cruz killed 17 people and injured more than 17 on February 14, 2018 (Drury, 2018). Like Adam Lanza, Nikolas Cruz was diagnosed with obsessive compulsive disorder (Drury, 2018).

Most recently, on May 24, 2022, Salvador Ramos, a resident of Uvalde, Texas entered Robb Elementary School (Fox News, 2022). It was believed that the 18-year-old killed 19 elementary school students from the ages of 7-10 and two teachers (Washington Post, 2022). As he entered the school ground on the last day of school, he opened fire with two semi-automatic platform rifles that were purchased when he turned 18 years of age (Fox News, 2022). According to BBC News (2022) Salvador Ramos was described as a loner who was bullied over a speech impediment and experienced an undesirable home life. According to the New York Times (2022) Ramos had few friends, was picked on for his clothes, and frequently did not attend Ulvade High School.

There are certain characteristics of students like Salvador Ramos, Seung-Hui Cho, Adam Lanza and Nikolas Cruz have that would indicate a potential disposition for violent behavior. This includes the following as reported by The American Psychological Association (1993):

1. Appearance of fearlessness and engaging in extensive risk taking,
2. Overly aggressive,
3. Displaying an impulsive temperament very early in life,
4. Unable to verbally express frustration, and
5. Often a bully, and as such, having a high potential for engaging in behaviors that could escalate to serious violence. (p. 1)

What should educators learn from the aftermath of these four incidents? The first is to report or refer any type of noticeable mental behaviors to an agency so that students can receive counseling or psychiatric help. There is a term in education that if a student exhibits suicidal behaviors or tendencies. They are usually placed on a 5150 hold for 48-72 hours at a mental health facility. The student must report danger to self or danger to others prior to administering the hold by a doctor or police officer (AB 2099, 2018, Ch.1472.)

The second takeaway from the Virginia Tech tragedy is that when shootings occur in real time, all parties such as students, teachers, staff members, administrators, district officials, and parents need to be immediately informed. Virginia Tech was fined by the United States Department of Education for failing to “issue a prompt campus-wide warning after Cho shot his first two victims” (History.com, 2019, p.1).

Many universities and schools across America today have notifications in place for parents and students. Children of parents in public, charter and private schools are informed of active shooters with an immediate phone call, email or text message. Students at private and public universities also have similar measures in place to announce immediate shootings, crime, and violence on or off campus.

Having the lines of communication open ensures the safety of students who are attending schools. It also informs parents of what is happening in their child's schools and to monitor their child's progress.

### **Motivations and Rationale Behind School Violence**

Psychologists, clinical psychiatrists, and researchers have conducted studies on the causes of school violence. One of the main reasons is because youth are exposed to violence in every aspect of their lives. This can include media and technology in the form of gaming that affects their reasons to commit acts of violence. Violence in the media and music has a tendency to send messages to young children. These messages are that it is acceptable to harass, kill, or exert aggressive behavior. Thus, the media's influence on young lives is a growing concern to educators and parents.

There are certain reasons behind why school violence exists. This is due to instances of poverty, racism, neglect, unemployment, and substance abuse plague violent neighborhoods (Snell & Volokh, 1998). Young children who witness inequalities, hardship, and drug deals in their living environment can become vulnerable and susceptible to their surroundings. According to the American Psychological Association (1993), communities will eventually reflect the success, or failure, of the schools' attempts to educate youth about alternatives to violence. This includes helping students understand that there are alternatives to bullying, cyberbullying, and school violence. This can include talking to a caring adult, seeking counseling, and after-school activities such as sports or band to keep youth away from gangs or drug deals.

De Voe et al. (2002) reported that simple assault is the most prevalent violent behavior among American students today. In almost every classroom environment in urban and rural areas there is at least one aggressive student present (De Voe et al., 2002). This student can be perceived as a threat or a bully. He or she can cause intentional harm to fellow classmates, teachers, and administrators. There are also aggressive students who are not so discernible in the classroom.

### **Policies and Resources for School Violence**

In response to school violence, several goals and policies have been enforced. Furlong and Morrison (2000) mention that the National Education Goal 7 allowed every school in America to be free of drugs, violence, firearms, and alcohol. The National Education Goal 7 is still in effect. The intent was to promote safety for all students and staff members.

The Safe and Drug-Free Schools and Communities Act was presented to and passed by Congress in 2004. According to the U.S. Department of Education (2004), The Safe and Drug-Free Schools and Communities act provides funding and resources for secondary schools to implement prevention activities against school violence.

In 2006, Congress passed the Student and Teacher Safety Act. According to the Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions (2006), this act allowed a full-time teacher or school official, acting on any reasonable suspicion based on professional experience and judgment, to conduct reasonable searches for weapons, dangerous materials, or illegal narcotics on students. Lastly, the U.S. government has responded to school violence with the HR 5295[109th] bill. According to the Library of Congress (2006), this bill was designed to assure that schools remain free of threats from drugs, dangerous weapons, or materials. These policies have provided strict guidelines for school districts to adhere to and are enforced to reduce school violence.

One of the policies required by California law is the school safety policy. It is an institutionalized code of conduct that demonstrates a commitment to violence prevention. It helps faculty and students feel safe. This policy, as set forth by participating schools, explains the school rules and punishments for infractions. Included in this policy are school anti-violence programs. These programs are designed to target illegal or antisocial behavior.

More recently, the SpeakUp for Safety tip line has been introduced in various school districts like the Corona-Norco Unified School District or CNUSD. This community resources provides an ongoing support to have safe schools. It allows students to easily and confidentially report any types of threats, bullying, peers who are undergoing crisis, and other dire concerns that might impact students' well-being and security (CNUSD, 2022). Any type of non-threatening tip will be noted and routed over to school or district members (CNUSD, 2022). Any type of urgent case where the student is in danger will be routed to a district-appointed contact or the local law enforcement (CNUSD, 2022). According to CNUSD (2022), the SpeakUp for Safety tip line is monitored by professionals 24 hours a day, seven days a week, and 365 days a year. SpeakUp for Safety is one community resource that serves to offer safe schools.

## Conclusion

It is imperative that educators are aware of students who might have a propensity to commit school violence due to their mental state of mind. Recognizing aggression and violent tendencies in their writing, speech and mannerisms is one way to address these concerns to counselors and psychologists. These are a few resources that troubled youth can be referred in seeking therapy or help. Understanding and identifying these unstable behaviors can help to curtail acts of school violence before more innocent lives are taken away each year in America.

## References

- American Psychological Association. (1993). *Summary report of the American Psychological Association Commission on Violence and Youth*. Washington, DC: Author.
- Beyer, D. (1997, May). School safety and the legal rights of students. *ERIC/CUE Digest*, (121).
- AB 2099, 2018. *Article 1. Detention of mentally disordered persons for evaluation and treatment*. Retrieved on July 10, 2019 from [https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/codes\\_displaySection.xhtml?lawCode=WIC&sectionNum=5150](https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/codes_displaySection.xhtml?lawCode=WIC&sectionNum=5150)
- BBC News, (2022, May 25). *Texas shooting: How a sunny Uvalde school day ended in bloodshed*. Retrieved on May 25, 2022 from <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-61577777>
- Boulter, L. (2004). Family-school connection and school violence prevention. *Negro Educational Review*, 55, 27.
- Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions. (2006). *Student and Teacher Safety Act of 2006*. Washington, DC: Author.
- Cox, J. (2007, April 19). No explanation for Virginia Tech tragedy. *South Alabamian*. Retrieved April 20, 2007, from <http://www.southalabamian.com/news/2007/0419/Editorials/014.html>
- CNN, (2019, April 8). *Virginia Tech Shootings fast facts*. Retrieved on July 10, 2019 from <https://www.cnn.com/2013/10/31/us/virginia-tech-shootings-fast-facts/index.html>
- CNN, (2019, May 1). *Columbine High School Shootings fast facts*. Retrieved on July 10, 2019 from <https://www.cnn.com/2013/09/18/us/columbine-high-school-shootings-fast-facts/index.html>
- CNUSD, (2022, May 25). *CNUSD Connection Newsletter*. Retrieved on May 25, 2022 from <https://mail.google.com/mail/u/1/#starred/FMfcgzGpFzwLkRfmgxHRLltzScTZVtsg>
- DeVoe, J. F., Peter, K., Kaufman, P., Ruddy, S. A., Miller, A. K., Planty, M., et al. (2002). *Indicators of school crime and safety: 2002*. Washington DC: Institute of Education Sciences.
- Dresser, J. (1994). Youth violence, bonding, and community. *The Prevention Researcher*, 1, 6-8.
- Drury, F. (2018, December 27). *Florida school shooting: What happened next?* Retrieved on July 12, 2019 from <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-46538254>
- Furlong, M., & Morrison, G. (2000). The school in school violence: Definitions and facts. *Journal of Emotional and Behavioral Disorders*, 8, 2.
- Fox News, (2022, May 25). *Who is the Texas Shooter? What we know*. Retrieved on May 25, 2022 from <https://www.foxnews.com/us/texas-school-shooter-what-we-know>
- Hawkins, J. D., & Weis, J. G. (1985, December). The social development model: An integrated approach to delinquency prevention. *Journal of Primary Prevention*, 6(2).
- History.com (2019, April 16). *Virginia Tech shooting leaves 32 dead*. Retrieved July 10, 2019 from <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/massacre-at-virginia-tech-leaves-32-dead>
- History.com (2019, July 10). *Columbines Shooting*. Retrieved July 10, 2019 from <https://www.history.com/topics/1990s/columbine-high-school-shootings>
- Hoffman, K. B. (1999, April 25). Massacre of 1927 . . . the state has its own history of bombing and killing at a schoolhouse. *Grand Rapids Press*, p. 1.
- Jones, D. (1999). *A comparison study of rural and urban gangs in America*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Southern Mississippi.

- Katersky, A. & Kim, S. (2014, November 21). *Five disturbing things we learned today about Sandy Hook shooter Adam Lanza*. Retrieved July 12, 2019 from <https://abcnews.go.com/US/disturbing-things-learned-today-sandy-hook-shooter-adam/story?id=27087140>
- Kranz, M. & Harrington, R. (2018, December 14). *Business Insider*. Retrieved July 12, 2019 from <https://www.businessinsider.com/who-were-the-victims-of-the-sandy-hook-shooting-2017-12>
- Last, L. (2001). School violence. *All Psychology Journal*, 1-4.
- Library of Congress. (2006). *To protect students and teachers*. Washington, DC: Author.
- MacDonald, I. M. (1996). *Systemic violence: How schools hurt children*. London: Falmer Press.
- National Center for Education Statistics. (1998). *Indicators of school crime and safety, 1998*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education.
- National School Safety Center. (2009). *Gangs in schools: Breaking up is hard to do*. Malibu, CA: Pepperdine University.
- New York Times, (2022, May 25.) *The Texas gunman had few friends in high school, classmates say*. Retrieved on May 25, 2022 from <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/25/us/texas-shooting-gunman-bullied.html>
- Olson, D. (2006, November 25). Measures vary with no promise of success: Experts still say campuses are safe places. *Press-Enterprise*. Retrieved March 25, 2007, from [http://www.pe.com/localnews/desert/stories/PE\\_News\\_Local\\_S\\_security26.39a879.html](http://www.pe.com/localnews/desert/stories/PE_News_Local_S_security26.39a879.html)
- Picone, D. (2003). *Through the eyes of children: Understanding school violence from the perpetrators' perspective*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Hofstra University.
- Schwartz, W. (1996, March). *Preventing youth violence in urban schools: An essay collection*. New York: ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education.
- Serrano, R., & Zucchini, D. (2007, April 19). Gunman's angry diatribe mailed between attacks. *Los Angeles Times*.
- Snell, L., & Volokh, A. (1998, January). Strategies to keep schools safe. *School Violence Prevention*, 234, 1-8.
- Thomas, C. (2005, April 1). Serious delinquency and gang membership. *Psychiatric Times*, 12, 4.
- Toby, J. (1998). Getting serious about school discipline. *The Public Interest*, 133, 68-84.
- Uphoff, A. (1999). *The social construct of school violence in American schools: A historical analysis*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Texas—Arlington.
- U.S. Department of Education. (2004). *Safe and drug-free schools and communities act*. Washington, DC: Author.
- Washington Post, (2022, May 25). *Here's how to help those affected by the Uvalde school shooting*. Retrieved on May 25, 2022 from <https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2022/05/25/help-uvalde-texas-shooting-victims/>
- Zerbisias, A. (2007, April 20). Need-to-know vs. sensationalism. *Toronto Star*. Retrieved April 20, 2007, from <http://www.thestar.com/artsentertainment/article/205275>