Safe Communities ~ Safe Schools

FACT SHEET

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Targeted School Violence

In 2002, the U.S. Secret Service completed the Safe School Initiative, a study of school shootings and other school-based attacks that was conducted in collaboration with the U.S. Department of Education. The study examined school shootings in the United States as far back as 1974, through the end of the school year in 2000, analyzing a total of 37 incidents involving 41 student attackers. The study involved extensive review of police records, school records, court documents, and other source materials, and included interviews with 10 school shooters. The focus of the study was on developing information about the school shooters' pre-attack behaviors and communications. The goal was to identify information about a school shooting that may be identifiable or noticeable before the shooting occurs, to help inform efforts to prevent school-based attacks. Their major findings are presented below.

Characterizing the Attacker

- There is no accurate or useful "profile" of students who engaged in targeted school violence. Although all of the attackers were boys, they varied considerably in demographics, background, as well as other characteristics, and came from a variety of family situations.
- Many attackers felt bullied, persecuted, or injured prior to the attack.
- A history of having been the subject of a mental health evaluation, diagnosed with a mental disorder, or involved in substance abuse did not appear to be prevalent among attackers. However, most attackers showed some history of suicidal attempts or thoughts, or a history of feeling extreme depression or desperation.
- Over half of the attackers demonstrated some interest in violence, through movies, video games, books, and other media.   However, there was no one common type of interest in violence indicated. Instead, the attackers' interest in violent themes took various forms. The largest group of attackers exhibited an interest in violence in their own writings, such as poems, essays, or journal entries.
- Most attackers had no history of prior violent or criminal behavior.
- Most attackers were known to have had difficulty coping with significant losses or personal failures.

Conceptualizing the Attack

- Incidents of targeted violence at school *rarely* are sudden, impulsive acts.
- Almost all of the attackers developed the idea to harm the target and planned out the attack in advance.
- Revenge was a motive for more than half of the attackers. Other motives included trying to solve a problem, suicide or desperation and efforts to get attention or recognition. More than half of the attackers had multiple motives.

Signaling the Attack

- Prior to most incidents, other people knew about the attacker's idea and/or plan to attack. In nearly all of these cases, the person who knew was a peer—a friend, schoolmate or sibling.
- Most attackers did not threaten their targets directly prior to advancing the attack.
- Most attackers engaged in some behavior, prior to the incident, that caused others concern or indicated a need for help.

Advancing the Attack

- In many cases, other students were involved in the attack in some capacity. Although most attackers carried out their attacks on their own, many were influenced or encouraged by others to engage in the attacks. In other cases, friends assisted the attacker in his efforts to acquire a weapon, or ammunition, discussed tactics for getting a weapon into school undetected, or helped gather information about the whereabouts of a target.
- Most attackers had access to and had used weapons prior to the attack. Over two-thirds of the attackers acquired the gun (or guns) used in their attacks from their own home or that of a relative.

Resolving the Attack

- Despite prompt law enforcement responses, most attacks were stopped by means other than law enforcement intervention. Most school-based attacks were stopped through intervention by school administrators, educators, and students or by the attacker stopping on his own.
- Close to half of the incidents were known to last 15 minutes or less from the beginning of the shooting to the time the attacker was apprehended, surrendered or stopped shooting. The fact that most of the targeted school violence incidents studied were not stopped by law enforcement appears in a large part to be a function of how brief most of these incidents were in duration.

Preventing School Attacks

Findings from the Safe School Initiative suggest that some school attacks may be preventable, and that students can play an important role in prevention efforts. In addition, some level of information sharing among relevant parties (mental health, teachers, parents, law enforcement, etc) may be invaluable in accurately assessing threat levels of students who have shown signs of possible targeted violence.

School and other prevention officials may wish to consider focusing their efforts to formulate strategies for preventing these attacks in two principal areas:

- developing the capacity to pick up on and evaluate available or knowable information that might indicate that there is a risk of a targeted school attack; and,
- employing the results of these risk evaluations or "threat assessments" in developing strategies to prevent potential school attacks from occurring.

Educators must create an environment where students feel comfortable telling an adult when they feel that someone might do harm to themselves or others. School settings in which teachers and administrators pay attention to students' social and emotional needs as well as their academic needs support a climate of safety in the school. Once such an environment is created, it is important that the adults in that environment listen to students and handle their concerns in a fair and responsible manner. The establishment of a threat assessment process for investigating, evaluating and managing threats is a necessary component of creating the kind of climate which can help in preventing school attacks.

References:

United States Secret Service and United States Department of Education. (2004) *The Final Report and Findings of the Safe School Initiative:Implications for the Prevention of School Attacks in the United States.*