

## School Shootings, the “Copycat Effect”, and the Media

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After the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting in Newtown, Connecticut on December 14, 2012 (which followed the Clackamas Town Center shooting in Portland, Oregon on December 11, 2012) links to stories in the media and concerns about copycat shooters quickly circulated throughout our community. Parents, students, and the community as a whole were justifiably concerned about the safety of our schools, and the risk to our children from copycat shooters.

As the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting was reported on the news, many posted expressions of shock, grief, and concern for the victims to social media sites, and shared links to news stories via e-mail. Even the Joint Base Lewis-McChord (JBLM) Installation Operations Center (IOC) / Watch Office distributed a link to a news story in the *Chicago Tribune*, with the sensationalized title: Connecticut school shooting: Witness inside school: 'I've got bodies here' [<http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/chi-connecticut-school-shooting-20121214,0,4678476.story>]. While the sharing of information on social media is both understood and expected (and may be a healthy outlet following this type of event), the spreading of sensationalized news stories does little to accurately inform the community of on-going events, often results in speculation and misinformation, and may serve to create irrational fears or a state of hypervigilance in some individuals. It is important to understand that:

Though school shootings are extensively covered in the news media, the information available in news reports is not necessarily complete, accurate, or balanced. News coverage is inherently hasty and often relies on sources who themselves have incomplete or inaccurate information. And journalists ordinarily do not have access to police and other investigative reports that may contain highly significant but confidential information about a school shooting incident or about the background, previous activities, and traits of the student or students [or others] who carried out the shooting. (WA Military Department, Emergency Management Division, p.3)

Drs. Booth, Van Hasselt, and Vecchi (2011: 1) writing in the *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin* stated:

Incidents, such as the recent ones at Columbine, Virginia Tech, and Northern Illinois University, [and now of course Sandy Hook Elementary School] produce horrifying, enduring images. Members of the mass media publicize and inadvertently glorify these events to capture the attention of viewers and readers. Unfortunately, many of the portrayals have led to faulty assumptions and stereotypes of the school violence perpetrator.

In 2001 Dr. Mary O'Toole, included the following statement in a monograph:

*The Copycat Effect*

*School shootings and other violent incidents that receive intense media attention can generate threats or copycat violence elsewhere. Copycat behavior is very common, in fact. Anecdotal evidence strongly indicates that threats increase in schools nationwide after a shooting has occurred anywhere in the United States. Students, teachers, school administrators and law enforcement officials should be more vigilant in noting disturbing student behavior in the days and weeks or even several months following a heavily publicized incident elsewhere in the country. (p.24)*

When taken out of context this statement may be used to justify profiling students, but this is clearly something that must be avoided. The "copycat effect" statement was a single bullet in a study conducted by O'Toole at the National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime (NCAVC) and must be evaluated as part of the overall research, not held out as a stand-alone statement. Dr. O'Toole's research is informative and worth reading, but should not be taken out of context. It should be noted, as stated in her paper, the "model is not a "profile" of the school shooter or a checklist of danger signs pointing to the next adolescent who will bring lethal violence to a school. Those things do not exist."

According to the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP). (2002) there is no "profile of risk factors that accurately determines the next school shooter. Most students who display multiple risk factors will never become violent offenders and some who pose a real threat will not demonstrate a prescribed level of risk. The use of profiling (i.e., ranking a student's behaviors and risk factors against a set of criteria) strongly increases the likelihood of misidentifying youngsters."

The NASP continued, stating:

It is important to avoid misperceptions about the prevalence and causes of school violence. Perhaps most critical to keep in mind is that no single factor leads to violence; multiple factors cause a person to become violent. All approaches to prevention and intervention, including threat assessment, should be based on what we actually know about the phenomenon. Secret Service and FBI findings include:

- School violence is not an epidemic
- All school shooters are not alike and there is no accurate profile of the violent offender
- School shooters often have social difficulties, but they are not always loners
- Although a common factor, revenge is not the exclusive motivation for school shootings

- Most attackers had previously used guns and had access to them, but access to weapons is not the most significant risk factor
- Unusual or aberrant behaviors or interests are not the hallmark of a student destined to become violent
- Incidents of targeted violence at school are rarely impulsive
- Prior to most incidents, the attacker told someone about his/her idea or plans
- Most shooting incidents were not resolved by law enforcement
- In many cases, other students were involved in some capacity
- In a number of cases, bullying played a key role in and could have been a predictor of the attack
- Prior to the incident, most attackers engaged in behavior that caused concern

A National Institute of Justice (NIJ) study found that:

There is no accurate profile of a "school shooter,"... The shooters came from a variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds and ranged in age from 11 to 21 years. Some came from intact families with ties to the community; others came from foster homes with histories of neglect. Their academic performance ranged from excellent to failing. Few had been diagnosed with any mental disorder prior to the incident, and less than one-third had histories of drug or alcohol abuse. (Schuster, 2009)

Although the NIJ study found, as have many other studies, that there is no accurate profile of a school shooter; the study also found that in almost all cases (93%) school shooters behaved in a way that caused concern or indicated a need for help prior to the shooting incident. In more than 75% of the cases, the shooter told a sibling, friend, or schoolmate about the plan to attack the school. However, rarely were these reports communicated to proper authorities (school administrators or law enforcement) prior to the incident occurring.

### **The Importance of Reporting**

Because in most cases school shooters exhibit some behavior that causes concern prior to the incident; it is essential that these concerns be quickly reported to proper authorities. Obviously any imminent threat (such as seeing someone in the school with a firearm) should be reported to law enforcement by calling 911. However, not all concerns are a result of an imminent threat. A student's conduct, changes in behavior and attitude, and perhaps even statements about a plan or idea to attack the school may not be an imminent threat, but certainly indicates a potential threat and should be immediately reported to school administration (i.e. teacher, principal, guidance counselor, or school resource officer).

In some cases the cause for concern may not be a student, but is someone outside of the school system. In these cases immediate reporting is just as important, however there can be

some confusion about where to report these concerns and other suspicious activity affecting the installation.

On JBLM the Office of the Provost Marshal serves as the centralized point for reporting suspicious activity. The Provost Marshal has primary responsibility for receiving suspicious activity reports, and JBLM Regulation 210-1 requires that all crimes or incidents affecting the maintenance of good order and discipline committed on the Joint Base Lewis-McChord be reported to the Police Desk Sergeant by the most expeditious means.\* Personnel on other installations should report to their own DES/PMO\*\*, and off-post report to the law enforcement agency having jurisdiction in your location.

### **Awareness Training**

Shooting incidents in the community or seen on the news may leave some individuals feeling vulnerable and wondering how to respond should they find themselves in a similar situation.

Research has shown that many of these situations are over in minutes and law enforcement may not arrive in time. As a result, employees have to become stakeholders in their own safety and security and develop a survival mind-set comprised of awareness, preparation, and rehearsal. Vigorous prevention programs, timely intervention, and appropriate responses by organizations and their employees will contribute significantly to a safe and secure work environment. (Romano, et.al 2011)

For individuals wishing to obtain additional information on active shooters and workplace violence the Defense Civilian Personnel Advisory Service provides on-line training for both employees and supervisors:

#### **Preventing Workplace Violence for Employees**

<http://media.cpms.osd.mil/faslerd/employee/menu.htm>

#### **Preventing Workplace Violence for Supervisors**

<http://media.cpms.osd.mil/faslerd/supervisor/menu.htm>

The Federal Emergency Management Agency offers three courses that address these issues:

#### **IS-907 - Active Shooter: What You Can Do**

<http://training.fema.gov/EMIWeb/IS/is907.asp>

An active shooter is an individual actively engaged in killing or attempting to kill people in a confined and other populated area. In most cases, active shooters use firearms and there is no pattern or method to their selection of victims. Active shooter situations are unpredictable and evolve quickly. All employees can help prevent and prepare for potential active shooter

situations. This course provides guidance to individuals, including managers and employees, so that they can prepare to respond to an active shooter situation.

### **IS-106.12 - Workplace Violence Awareness Training 2012**

<http://training.fema.gov/EMIWeb/IS/is106.12.asp>

The goal of this course is to give employees awareness of violence in the workplace, how to recognize the warning signs, and what actions to take to prevent or minimize violence.

### **IS-906 - Workplace Security Awareness**

<http://training.fema.gov/EMIWeb/IS/IS906.asp>

This course provides guidance to individuals and organizations on how to improve the security in your workplace. No workplace—be it an office building, construction site, factory floor, or retail store—is immune from security threats. Employees are often the target of these threats as well as the organization's first line of defense against them. Threats endanger the confidentiality, integrity, and security of your workplace, as well as your virtual workplace and computer systems. This course presents information on how employees can contribute to your organization's security.

### **Active Shooter Video**

The City of Houston, TX has prepared an active shooter awareness video, providing information about how to respond if you find yourself caught in an active shooter scenario. The six minute video may be watched and downloaded from YouTube:

YouTube Video - <http://youtu.be/5VcSwejU2D0>

Alternate Link to Video - <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5VcSwejU2D0>

## References

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- Schuster, Beth. (2009). Preventing, Preparing for Critical Incidents in Schools. *National Institute of Justice Journal*, No. 262, March 2009. <http://www.nij.gov/journals/262/critical-incidents-in-schools.htm>
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## Reporting Requirements

\* JBLM Regulation 210-1, para. 7-8. Crimes and Incident Reporting. All crimes or incidents affecting the maintenance of good order and discipline committed on the Joint Base Lewis-McChord will be reported to the Police Desk Sergeant by the most expeditious means.

\*\* ALARACT 110/2010, para. 3C(3) - The Director of Emergency Services (DES) and Provost Marshal (PM) Office should serve as the office of primary responsibility for receiving suspicious activity reports.