Protecting America's Schools:
A U.S. Secret Service Analysis of Targeted School Violence (2019)

US Dept. of Homeland Security
US Secret Service
National Threat Assessment Center

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www.secretservice.gov/data/protection/ntac/usss-analysis-of-targeted-school-violence.pdf

Summary of Study & Findings

- 41 Attacks against US K-12 Schools (Jan 2008 - Dec. 2017) by 41 students

- **Targeted school violence:** Any incident in which
    - a current 90%or recently former (10%) K-12 school student;
    - purposefully used a weapon;
    - to cause physical injury or death of at least one other student and/or school employee;
    - in or on the immediate property of the school; while
    - targeting in advance one or more specific and/or random student(s) and/or employee(s).

- <u>Excludes</u> attacks:
    - Where perpetrator could not be identified, or
    - Incidents related to gang violence, drug violence, or other incidents with a strong suggestion of a separate criminal nexus.
    - Violence from the surrounding community that spilled onto school property by happenstance.
    - Spontaneous acts, such as those that were the immediate result of an unplanned fight or other sudden confrontation.

- Drawn from investigative information for 35 of 41 cases, supplemented with open source information

- 80% of schools had implemented physical security measures such as:
    - Lockdown procedures (68%)
    - Alert Systems rare (17%)
    - School Resource Officers (46% FT and 20% PT)
    - Reporting tools rare (17%)
    - TAM Protocols: (22%)

- 41% of attacks occurred in FIRST week back following break for suspensions or holidays.

- Resolution:
    - 53% ended on own
    - 17% suicide
    - 17% left scene
    - 7% surrendered to school officials
    - 7% dropped weapons to be arrested

Key Findings

There is no profile of a student attacker, nor is there a profile for the type of school that has been targeted:

- Attackers varied in age, gender (83% male), race (White: 63%, Black: 15%, Multi: 10%, Hispanic: 5%), grade level, academic performance, & social characteristics.

- Schools varied in size, location, and student-teacher ratios. (75% at HS)

- Targeting:
  - Specific person (73%)
  - Specific group (15%)
  - Random (41%)
  - Collateral (12%)

➢ Threat assessment process should focus on gathering relevant information about behaviors, situational factors, and circumstances to assess the risk of violence or other harmful outcomes.

Attackers usually had multiple motives, the most common involving a grievance (83%):

- Grievances with classmates (63%), school staff (24%), romantic relationships (22%), or other personal issues (15%).

- Other motives included: desire to kill (37%), suicide (41%), seeking notoriety (10%), psychotic (12%).

Most attackers (61%) used firearms, and firearms were most often acquired from the home:

- Many able to access firearms from the home of their parents or another close relative.

- Some attackers (39%) used knives. Note: 1 stabbing resulted in 20 of 98 total victims from attacks

➢ Explore if a student has access to *any* weapons, with a particular focus on weapons access at home.

Most attackers (91%) had experienced psychological, behavioral, or developmental <u>symptoms</u>:

- Three main categories of observable mental health <u>symptoms</u> displayed prior to attacks
  - psychological (e.g., depressive symptoms: 63%; suicidal ideation: 60%; anxiety: 29%; psychosis: 20%);
  - behavioral (e.g., defiance/misconduct: 40%; ADHD/ADD: 29%; aggression: 23%; anger: 14%; animal cruelty: 9%);
  - neurological/developmental: 20% (e.g., developmental delays, cognitive deficits, learning disabilities).

- 40% had documented mental health <u>diagnosis</u> (population base rate is only about 20%)

- 54% had received one or more mental health services prior to their attack

- History of substance use (49%) or abuse (20%)

Half of the attackers had interests in violent topics:

- 49% preoccupied or fixated on violent interests: e.g., Columbine (23%); Hitler (20%)

- 51% had history of violent behavior

➢ Determine how interest originated and if it is negatively impacting thinking and behavior.

Nearly every attacker experienced negative home life factors:

- Factors: E.g., parental divorce or separation (71%), drug use (46%) or criminal charges (54%) among family members, or domestic abuse (40%).

- No factors are predictive of violence by themselves

- Many of these factors are associated with a range of negative outcomes for children (e.g., ACEs).

All attackers experienced social stressors involving their relationships with peers and/or romantic partners:

- Nearly all had at least one in the six months prior to their attack,

- Half within two days of the attack.

- Types: social stressors (100%), families and conflicts in the home (91%), academic or disciplinary actions (89%), or other personal issues.

- ➢ Staff Training:
    - Recognize signs of a student in crisis.
    - Crisis intervention, teaching skills to manage emotions and resolve conflicts, and suicide prevention.

Most attackers were victims of bullying (80%), which was often observed by others:

- Most were bullied by their classmates;

- For 57% bullying persisted for weeks, months, or years.

- Knowledge of bullying: Family (46%); peers (46%); School staff (34%)

- Despite attacker perception of bullying, no evidence in 9% of cases

- 37% of attackers were bullies

- ➢ Implement comprehensive programs designed to promote safe and positive school climates,
    - Students feel empowered to report bullying when they witness it or are victims of it,
    - School officials and other authorities act to intervene.

Most attackers had a history of school disciplinary actions (71%), many had prior contact with law enforcement:

- Most had a history of school disciplinary actions resulting from a broad range of inappropriate behavior.

- Included being suspended 51%, expelled 17%, or having law enforcement interactions as a result of their behavior at school.

- ➢ Consider that (solely) punitive measures are not preventative.

- ➢ Removing from the school may not always be the safest option.

- ➢ Employ disciplinary practices that ensure fairness, transparency with the student & family, and appropriate follow-up.

All attackers exhibited concerning behaviors. Most elicited concern from others, and most communicated their intent to attack

- Ranged from a constellation of lower-level concerns to objectively concerning or prohibited behaviors.

- Most (83%) communicated a prior threat to a target **or** communicated their intentions (to target or others) to carry out an attack.

- In many cases (66%), someone observed threatening communication or behavior but did not act, due to factors such as:
    - fear,
    - not believing the attacker,
    - misjudging the immediacy or location, or
    - believing they had dissuaded the attacker.

- ➢ Students, school personnel, & family members encouraged to report troubling or concerning behaviors to ensure that those in authority can intervene.

Comparison of Safe School Initiative (2002) and Protecting America's Schools (2019)

	Safe School Initiative (2002)	Protecting America's Schools (2019)
INCIDENTS	**n = 37**	**n = 41**
Years studied	1974 - 2000	2008 - 2017
Multiple attackers	8%	0%
Weapons	**97% firearm; 3% bladed; 8% had additional weapons**	**61% firearms; 39% bladed; 7% had additional weapons**
Handguns	*67% of 36 firearms attacks*	72% of 25 firearms attacks
Long Guns	*50% of 36 firearms attacks*	36% of 25 firearms attacks
Firearm from a residence	*73% of 36 firearms attacks*	76% of 25 firearms attacks
Victims specifically targeted	46%	56%
Subject committed suicide	13%	17%
ATTACKERS	**n = 41**	**n = 35 (of 41)**
Gender	100% male	83% male
Age	11-21	12-18
Status	95% current students	90% current students
History of any arrest	27%	31%
Violent crime	17%	17%
Subject abuse/neglected	27%	23%
Mental health diagnosis before	17%	40%
Mental health symptoms		
Depression	61%	63%
Suicidal thoughts/gestures	78%	63%
Suicide attempts	10%	11%
Substance use/abuse	49%	49%
Perceived as loners	34%	26%
History of Violence	31%	51%
Stressors	98%	100%
SCHOOL PERFORMANCE		
Academic performance		
Positive	27%	51%
Neutral	37%	14%
Negative	5%	31%
Unknown	17%	20%
Suspended (at least once)	27%	51%
Expelled (at least once)	10%	17%
Bullied by other students	71%	80%
Subject bullied other students	34%	37%
BEHAVIORS		
At least one person knew	83%	77%
A peer	83%	77%
An adult	7%	14%
Concerning behaviors observed	93%	100%