

School Safety #1: How Safe Are American Schools?

On December 12, 2012, Adam Lanza, a young man with Autism Spectrum Disorder, shot his way into Sandy Hook Elementary School and brutally murdered 20 children and six staff members before taking his own life.

In the years since then, we have rededicated ourselves to safer schools for our children. What and how have we done? How safe are American schools?

This article (the first in a series of three) will explore the incidence of lethal and non-lethal violence in our schools, and examine the effectiveness of two primary responses to school violence during the past decade.



For more information about this topic, visit www.TACT2.com or contact Dr. Steve Parese at SBParese@aol.com.

A History of Violence in Schools

Sandy Hook was not the first wake-up call we have had. There have been an alarming number of school shootings in the past 15 years, creating a palpable sense of fear among parents, staff, and students. The Columbine High School massacre on April 20, 1999 was among the first to capture international media attention: two very troubled teenage boys, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, armed with sawed off shotguns and semi-automatic pistols, managed to kill 12 students and one teacher, wounding 23 other people before taking their own lives. Since then, there have been many horrifying incidents of gun violence in American schools, including the December 14, 2012 slaying at Sandy Hook Elementary School.

Fortunately, mass murders such as those in Littleton, CO and Newtown, CT are very rare. Unfortunately, incidents of gun violence on school grounds are not. In fact, in the six years between January 2008 and December 2013, there have been at least 44 separate shooting incidents in America's elementary, middle, and high schools, resulting in a total of 58 deaths and at least 43 injuries.

For a full listing, see "School Shootings, 1999-2013" at www.TACT2.com/Readings.html

Consider the ten school shooting incidents which have occurred in 2013 since Sandy Hook:

Nov. 13, 2013: In Pittsburgh, PA, a gunman hiding in the woods near Brashear High School shot and wounded three students in the school parking lot.

Oct. 21, 2013: In Sparks, NV, a 12-year-old Sparks Middle School student shot and killed a teacher and injured two students before killing himself.

Oct. 4, 2013: In Pine Hills, FL, a 16-year-old student at Agape Christian Academy was shot in the hip by another student during a fight on school grounds.

Aug. 30, 2013: In Winston-Salem, NC, an 18-year-old student shot a 15-year-old at Carver High School, wounding him in the neck and shoulder.

Aug. 20, 2013: In Decatur, GA, a 20-year-old man entered McNair Learning Academy armed with an AK-47 and 500 rounds of ammunition. He later surrendered to police.

Apr. 29, 2013: In Cincinnati, OH, a LaSalle Catholic High School student shot himself, and was later hospitalized in critical condition.

Jan. 31, 2013: In Atlanta, GA, a Price Middle School student fired several shots at a 14-year-old classmate during an argument in the school courtyard, hitting him in the back of the neck.

Jan. 29, 2013: In Midland City, AL, a man in his 60's boarded a school bus and fatally shot the bus driver, then abducted a 6-year-old boy and held him hostage.

Jan. 12, 2013: In Detroit, MI, a 16-year-old boy was critically wounded when he was shot after a basketball game at Osborn High School.

Jan. 10, 2013: In Taft, CA, a 16-year-old student at Taft Union High School entered a science classroom with a 12-gauge shotgun and shot at two students, critically wounding one and missing the other.

Each of these shootings created a wake of traumatized children, families, staff, and communities, leaving permanent physical and emotional scars upon all those involved. The impact of these horrific events cannot be underestimated, nor should any expense be spared in preventing them from occurring again. But what safety measures most effectively protect our students and staff from violence, without creating a backlash of greater anxiety and fear?

Non-Lethal Violence in our Schools

As visible and tragic as they may be, school shootings such as these directly impact a relatively small number of schools and students. There are 55 million students enrolled in 98,000 public and 33,000 private/parochial elementary, middle, and high schools in the U.S.. Thankfully, only 44 of these 131,000 schools experienced a shooting incident between January 2008 and December 2013, meaning that 99.97% of schools were free from gun violence during that period.

But this does not mean that our schools are safe places. In the 2009-10 school year, public schools in the U.S. experienced an average rate of 30 violent incidents per 1,000 students. "Violent incidents" included actual or threatened physical attacks or fights (either with or without a weapon), rape, sexual battery, or robbery.¹ In 2007, public school students aged 12-18 were victims of about 1.5 million crimes, including theft or violent crimes, while they were inside school walls, on school property, or on their way to or from school.

In that same year, approximately 10% of all high school males reported being threatened or injured with a weapon of some sort at least once in the past year, and 22% of all high school students reported that they had been offered, sold, or given an illegal drug on school property during the past 12 months.²

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Virtually all schools admit to at least occasional problems with bullying, intimidation, and deliberately harmful teasing, and nearly one-quarter of all students (13 million children and youth) report being victimized by deliberate bullying on a weekly or even daily basis.³ Such behavior, when tolerated by school staff, creates a pervasive sense of fear and anxiety, impacting learning in significant ways for a sizable proportion of American school children. The incidence and impact of such bullying will be explored in greater detail in a second article.

Clearly, our schools are not as safe and secure as most Americans would like to think. Effective education can only take place when learning environments are free from fear. What have we done as a nation to protect our students from violence and fear?

Physical Security Measures

The threat of an armed gunman on school grounds is remote. Still, although 99.97% of American public and private schools have not experienced a school shooting in the past six years, the possibility must be taken seriously. Physical assaults on students and staff, sometimes with the use of other weapons, occur far more often than shootings, as do property destruction, vandalism and theft. Situations such as these present serious threats to the learning environment.

One major trend in school safety has been a dramatic increase in security procedures and personnel.

In 2013, the U.S. Dept. of Education⁴ reported:

- 92% of schools lock doors, windows, and gates to control access to the school building during school hours;
- 63% of schools require all faculty and staff to wear badges or picture IDs;
- 63% of schools have a notification system in place for school-wide emergencies;
- 61% of schools use security cameras to monitor school activity;
- 91% of schools have policies prohibiting use of cell phones;
- 43% of schools have one or more security staff (some armed) present at least one day per week;
- 1.4% of schools require students to pass through metal detectors daily.



Buzzer-entry doors, prominently displayed staff badges, and hidden cameras will certainly reduce the chance of random adults wandering our children’s halls. They may even help schools remain safer from intruders who, like Adam Lanza, are intent upon doing damage inside school walls. However, a majority of the shooting incidents within the last six years were not committed by unknown assailants within the school building, but by students who were approved to enter the school, or by individuals shooting from nearby woods or streets into parking lots, playgrounds, and courtyards, areas outside the protection of these measures. Reasonable physical security measures should not be abandoned, but we must acknowledge that by themselves, they are not sufficient protection.

Zero-Tolerance Policies

A second major trend in school safety has been the adoption of fierce “zero-tolerance” policies in American schools. The assumption is this: When students are clear that disruptive and aggressive behavior will automatically result in severe consequences, most will conclude that violence is simply not worth the cost. Those who engage in such behavior despite the consequences will be removed, and either way, the rest will feel safer as a result.

The need for clear standards regarding safe and appropriate behavior in school is inarguable. Should schools set strict policies regarding unacceptable levels of violence? Absolutely. But is the punishment and ultimate exclusion of violent students enough to ‘teach them a lesson’ and ensure the safety of the rest? Absolutely not.

The latest published report of the U.S. Department of Education,⁵ reported that in 2006, over 3.3 million U.S. students were given at least one day of out-of-school suspension, and 102,000 students expelled from their schools, rates nearly twice those in the 1970’s. The most commonly cited reasons for out-of-school suspension and expulsion included disruptive behavior, insubordination, and school fights (most of which did not involve weapons).

Does out-of-school suspension or expulsion encourage misbehaving students to behave better? In too many cases, the answer is no. The American Psychological Association’s Zero-Tolerance Task Force³ examined a vast wealth of data regarding the effectiveness of suspension, expulsion, and zero-tolerance policies. It found that students who are suspended regularly generally do not improve their behavior over time. Instead, suspension is linked to an increased likelihood of future behavior problems, academic difficulty, detachment and dropout.

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Being suspended for a period of days is rarely the unpleasant consequence school officials intend, at least for older students. Unless they are well-supervised at home, many simply sleep in, watch TV, play video games, or hang on the streets with other out-of-school youth. Instead of returning to school in a contrite mood and willing to improve, suspended students come back further behind academically, less likely to engage in class, and more despondent about the future.

These factors have been consistently linked to high school dropout and to juvenile and adult incarceration, a trend called the “school-to-prison pipeline.” This correlation is strongest among our most vulnerable students -- those from poverty-stricken homes, those with learning difficulties or mental health issues, and African-American males.⁶ In fact, students with disabilities were found to be twice as likely to be suspended or expelled as their non-disabled peers. African-American students were found to receive more severe punishments for less serious offenses compared to their white classmates, and were three times as likely to be suspended or expelled as white students.³

Does the rigid exclusion of misbehaving students create a more academically friendly learning environment for those who remain? Again, the answer is no. The APA Task Force found little evidence to suggest that our nation’s zero-tolerance discipline policies have had any significant positive impact on actual school safety or achievement. In fact, they found that schools with higher rates of suspensions and expulsions had lower academic achievement, even when controlling for demographics such as socioeconomic status, and concluded:

The goal of any effective disciplinary system must be to ensure a safe school climate without threatening students’ opportunity to learn. Zero tolerance has created controversy by threatening the opportunity to learn for great numbers of students. Moreover, our review of a large data base on school discipline reveals that, despite the removal of large numbers of purported troublemakers, zero tolerance policies have still not guaranteed safe school climates that ensure school learning.³

Summary

In the past 20 years, U.S. schools have utilized more and more severe means of controlling disruptive, destructive, and dangerous behaviors in our classrooms. In response to a number of frightening (but fortunately rare) school shootings, over 90% of American schools have improved their security measures, including locking doors during school hours, increasing camera surveillance, using metal detectors, and hiring uniformed security officers. It is impossible to know how many lives have actually been saved by these measures, but few would argue that the investment is worthwhile.

In addition, many schools have adopted zero-tolerance discipline policies, hoping that harsh punishments for disruption, insubordination, bullying and fighting would force student compliance and improve school safety. Unfortunately, there seems to be little evidence connecting suspensions and expulsions to improved school climates. In fact, the opposite seems to be true: when schools abide by zero-tolerance policies and remove students without regard for the underlying causes of their misbehavior, the academic performance of the entire student body suffers. In addition, many of those 3.3 million disruptive students who lose one or more days of education every year (a disproportionate number of which are Black and male) return to school with more academic and behavioral problems, slip further behind their peers, and are ultimately moved one step further along the “school-to-prison pipeline,” perpetuating a larger problem of racial and class inequality.



Every student deserves a physically safe, emotionally secure learning environment, but this cannot be accomplished simply by installing new security cameras or by implementing exclusionary zero-tolerance policies. In fact, these reactionary solutions may overlook the greatest single threat to our students' availability to learning: persistent and insidious bullying, much of which is ignored or goes unreported. The second article in this series explores this issue: "One Year After Sandy Hook: Bullying in American Schools."

References:

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- ² Dinkes, R., Kemp, J., & Baum, K. (2009). *Indicators of School Crime and Safety: 2009* (NCES 2010–012/ NCJ 228478). National Center for Education Statistics, Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education, and Bureau of Justice Statistics, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice. Washington, DC.

- ³ Skiba, R., Reynolds, C., Graham, S., Sheras, P., Conoley, J., & Garcia-Vazquez, E. (2006). *Are Zero Tolerance Policies Effective in the Schools? An Evidentiary Review and Recommendations*, *American Psychological Association*. Zero Tolerance Task Force.

- ⁴ U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. (2013). *Indicators of School Crime and Safety: 2012* (NCES 2013-036), [Table 20.2](#).

- ⁵ U.S. Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights, 2006 Data Collection. Retrieved from http://ocrdata.ed.gov/StateNationalEstimations/projections_2006

- ⁶ Fenning, P., & Rose, J. (2007). Overrepresentation of African American students in exclusionary discipline. *Urban Education*, 42(6): 536-559

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