

# **The Psychology of School Shooters and the Need for Improved Threat Assessment Guides**

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## **Abstract**

This paper investigates the growing problem of school shootings while examining current remedies such as that relate to text-based analysis and threat assessment guides. Drawing on the background of school shooters, three types of perpetrators are identified: traumatized, psychotic, and psychopathic. It was found that traumatized shooters were influenced while psychotic and psychopathic shooters had psychological disorders. An analysis of the manifestos of school shooters, which presented existential concerns, showed that many shooters turn to murder-suicide to feel powerful, and yet, end the pain that they feel. By studying these letters, psychologists are able to understand the mind of a school shooter. To address school shootings, it is important to consider prevention problems. Threat assessment guides could aid in determining potential threats as shown through the “Networks Against School Shootings”. NETWASS offers a solution through its prevention program by training teachers to identify warning signs in order to implement early mediation of student psychological problems. For this literature review, scholarly journal articles were examined for further analysis. Articles were taken from *Aggression and Violent Behavior*, *Frontiers In Psychiatry*, and *Child Development*. Official reports were also used for additional information.

*Keywords: school shooters, psychotic, psychopathic, traumatized, threat assessment guide*

## Introduction

Statistics have shown that school shootings have dramatically increased in the past two decades. Most people would even state that news reports on school shootings seem to be more frequent. And so, how can one prevent school shootings becoming more prevalent? The solution is to understand the complex mind of school shooters in order to properly implement school shooting prevention programs, and thus lessen or prevent the number of school shootings. In this paper, a brief background will be shared. Next, a section on understanding school shooters will be explained with sub-sections on familial problems, mental health, and manifestos and existential concerns. Then, implementation on prevention programs will be explored with sub-sections on automatic text-based analysis, the NETWASS program, and threat assessment guideline.

## Background

During the last 25 years, over 250 students have died from school shootings and hundreds more have been injured or psychologically traumatized for life. School administrators and mental health experts have tried to determine what factors have led to school shootings by looking at the issue from a historical, sociological, and psychological perspective. Historically speaking, school shootings were brought to the public's attention after the 1999 Columbine shooting when Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold killed 14 students and a teacher while wounding several others in Littleton, Colorado. Previous to Columbine, school shootings were not frequently reported in the news since they occurred in small towns unknown to many Americans. In fact, Columbine was the first mass shooting at a high school that was reported in the news. Since then, news of multiple school shootings have become more and more prevalent.

Law enforcement started to actively organize lockdown drills and surveillance while schools across the country started to implement a “zero tolerance policy” regarding weapons, drugs, and threats. However, experts believe that high security systems are only a ‘band-aid’ solution and does not get to the root of the problem. Rather, it is important to place value in creating a safe environment where students feel comfortable enough to talk to staff members about their personal problems -- whether it be family issues or problems at school. Interestingly enough, most school shooters were either dealing with problems at home.

### Understanding School Shooters

More often than not, school shooters have been dehumanized and portrayed as depraved villains. This is especially done in media, as news reports focus more on the school shooter rather than the victims. In most instances, school shooters have been portrayed as psychotic killers, and thus, completely abnormal. Also, most correlations for gun violence have been rather shallow by blaming violent video games and movies. However, research has shown that gun violence is far more complicated than what is presented in the media. The main issues that should be raised are familial problems, mental health, and manifestos and existential concerns.

#### 1. Familial Problems

There have been a variety theories for what causes perpetrators to start school shootings. Although many people blame it on the media or bullying at schools, these reasons are not backed by concrete evidence. Given the number of people who are exposed to violence on the media on a daily basis. With this line of reasoning, the rate of school shootings should be much higher. Contrary to popular belief, research has shown that there are distinct sociological and psychological reasons as to why such tragedies occur. In one journal article titled, “Rampage

School Shooters: A Typology”, Langman gathered data of ten rampage school shooters through a variety of evaluations and assessments made available after the shooting. The ten shooters examined in the study were chosen because there was enough information about each of them to carry out a descriptive analysis. The ten school shooters were split into three distinct groups: traumatized, psychotic, and psychopathic. All three shooters usually had issues at home, although some psychotic and psychopathic shooters had displayed mental disorders. Psychotic shooters, on the other hand, most often had mental disorders.

For the first type of shooter, also known as “traumatized” shooters, three out of the ten shooters were found to have grown up in broken homes. For instance, Evan Ramsey had a father who was in jail for committing violent acts and had an alcoholic mother (Langman 81). Ramsey was removed from his home due to severe neglect, and moved from one foster home to another during his childhood. Unfortunately, at these homes, he experienced physical and sexual abuse. It was found that in Ramsey’s case, his initial plan was to commit suicide at school, but his friends convinced him to kill other students. They even showed him how to use a gun, and thus led to a rampage shooting. Ramsey was not deemed psychotic but was negatively impacted by his environment. This was the same for fellow traumatized shooter Mitchell Johnson who also had a threatening and alcoholic father (Newman 33). The idea to kill his classmates was his cousin Andrew Golden’s (the other shooter) idea, which is similar to Ramsey. Two factors that stood out among traumatic killers were that each person all had father figures who were involved in criminal activities. Also, most of them were peer pressured into committing acts of violence.

Within psychotic shooters, family structure seemed to have a big effect. All five children were the youngest in their family and apparently had a high achieving older sibling, making them

the black sheep of their families (Langman 85). This would have led to continuous comparison between the siblings, which could lead to low self-esteem and other psychological problems.

On the other hand, psychopathic shooters may have grown up in a family in which firearms were out in the open. For example, Andrew Golden's grandfather was a hunter and his parents were part of a local pistol association (Newman 39). Golden was given his first firearm from his father at the age of six. This can be dangerous especially with teens, as teens are more prone to act upon emotions instead of thinking first before actions. Golden was quoted in saying that he felt more confident, stronger, and even God-like when carrying a gun -- showing that he placed his sense of power and identity onto a firearm (Langman 85). Parents giving him a firearm at such a young age may have fostered a misconstrued identity complex as well as psychopathic tendencies.

## 2. Mental Health

It should first be noted that the source of most or all school shootings are not simply due to mental health. In most cases, especially media, the issues of a school shooter have been reduced to mental disorders. Rather than doing this, the reasons on what caused the school shooter to do such an action should be more deeply examined. Simply put, the motivations behind the school shooter are much more complex and deep than simply the shooter having mental problems. However, the mental problems behind both the psychotic and psychopathic shooters are worth mentioning. It should also be noted that psychosis and psychopathy are different from each other.

In a study, five out of ten school shooters had no particular family problem but displayed psychotic characteristics such as schizophrenia. For instance, Michael Carneal, was known to

have an extreme fear of monsters and demons in his house (Newman 24). It was later revealed that he suffered from early stages of schizophrenia, paranoia, and many hallucinations. Kip Kinkel also experienced early stages of schizophrenia when he was convinced that there was a man that wanted to hurt him. Not only that, he believed that China was going to invade the United States, and that Disney was going to take over the world (Lieberman 44). Kinkel also heard voices inside his head that persuaded him to hurt people. This eventually led to the murder of his parents and two students at his school. It was reported that Kinkel had a family history of mental disorders and he actually felt distraught by what he did.

The last type of shooter is the psychopathic shooters in which two of the ten subjects showed traits of this kind. Psychopathy can be described as lacking emotion and having sadistic pleasure in hurting and seeing others in pain. At the age of eleven, Andrew Golden (also a psychotic) was notorious for being mean and cruel towards his neighbors and animals while acting like a sweet child in front of his parents (Newman, 40). He reportedly enjoyed torturing cats as he killed many of them by starving and shooting them. He saw himself higher than the rules. Even in court, he didn't show an ounce of regret or guilt towards the victims despite being only eleven years old at the time. This was the same for Columbine shooter Eric Harris as he completely disregarded the rules that were made by his community and school. Harris was also known for being a pathological liar and acting in any way he saw fit. Harris committed various crimes even before the shooting and refused to acknowledge right from wrong (Langman 84). Harris was involved in fraud, stealing, and vandalizing in his community and thought that he was "God." He believed that he was superior over everyone else and was sadistic by having thoughts of raping girls and mutilating bodies. His sadistic traits were also apparent during the shooting

where he was laughing and making fun of people that he shot down (84). The two students who are considered to have been psychopathic shooters had no sense of morality and felt delight in the pain of others.

Understanding these characteristics of psychosis and psychopathy can help the process of preventing school shootings in the future. It is important to know that people with these symptoms had serious mental health problems and needed help. Four out of the five psychotic shooters reportedly had a substance abuse problem, and to make matters worse, none of them were prescribed medication or counseling for their psychotic disorders (85). It is highly dangerous for a psychotic or schizophrenic to be unprescribed with medication. Statistics like these show unawareness and neglect towards people with real mental issues. If this changes, then the violence caused from such people can lessen.

#### Manifestos and Existential Concerns

Another important element in a school shooting, which often involve murder-suicide, is manifestos. These concerns address more towards the psychopathic type. Existential needs are crucial and when they are not addressed because people can resort to violence. In examining the concerns that perpetrators have before committing a crime -- through letters or papers written beforehand -- the motives and mental state of the shooter can be known. Existential concerns can refer to matters such as life, death, freedom, individuality, and more. The basis for these existential concerns is the fear of death because people don't want to feel vulnerable, thus, resorting to violence in order to make themselves feel stronger than everyone else (Pfeifer and Ganzevoort 3). By understanding the existential concerns of the shooter, law enforcement can understand the conflicts that pervade the mind of a shooter.

One study examined seven different manifestos with the original document made available in case of mistranslation. Papers only directly written by the shooter prior to their crime were used. The papers were evaluated individually and sometimes in pairs when two shooters were involved in one case. The next step was to see how these existential concerns were shown in the text through a scale that ranged from positive, neutral, and negative (6). To demonstrate, the concern of death is positive when the shooter thinks that death can be an answer to his problems. Neutral statements were when the content was more broad rather than specific such as, “not all human lives are important or worth saving” (6). Interestingly enough, death was a top frequency in the shooters’ existential concerns. The other two were isolation and identity, which are also worth mentioning.

As mentioned, death was a top frequency in most of the texts. Murder was a way to make the perpetrators feel powerful, and suicide was seen as a way to either end their pain or make them feel memorable, like a hero. For example, in his video prior to his shooting, Seung Hee Cho likened his death to Jesus Christ. The shooters that were found to use murder as an existential concern for death (Kip Kinkel, Luke Woodham, and Eric Harris), all thought of murder to be a solution to the evil in the world and a way to idolize themselves. Isolation appears in five different cases with top frequencies when victims feel lonely and like an outcast. A prime example would be Dylan Klebold where he expresses in his manifesto that he felt left out his whole life and he never had a friend. This led to his hatred for everyone around him. In five of the cases that include this existential concern, identity appeared as the top frequency. This concern is shown as the shooters talked about what others see them as and what they see themselves as. Most of the perpetrators thought that they were above everybody else like Eric



Harris who claimed that he was one of the few people that are intelligent. A minority of the shooters such as Kip Kinkel actually expressed remorse and sadness towards who he is and wants to be.

### Implementation of Prevention Programs

The proper implementation of prevention programs may be a difficult task, but a worthwhile one. It is an understatement to say that schools need more implementation of prevention programs. A simple lockdown drill cannot prevent school shootings nor provide proper safety. Although, there is no one prevention program is perfect, there are useful and effective programs worth mentioning. These programs are automatic text-based analysis, the NETWASS program, and the threat assessment guide.

#### 1. Automatic Text-Based Analysis

Psychiatrists are regularly asked to profile school shooters in order to find ways to prevent these types of crimes. This profiling that experts do can be used when dealing with future offenders and get a descriptive analysis of the shooters' personalities. Despite these efforts, psychiatrists have yet to find a consistent trait among school shooters. For instance, Seung Hee Cho was found to suffer from various mental disorders including narcissistic personality disorder (NPD). Though uncommon, NPD is a disorder that has been present in mass murderers, particularly among school shooters (Neuman 1). Nevertheless, based on the small population of school shooters, limited information, and the extreme variety of data, no clear diagnosis can be used to predict the behavior of school shooters.

Recently however, automatic text-based analysis has shown some promise. Hidden meaning of a message could be identified through a text-analysis of words that come before and

after the word in question (2). To demonstrate, when trying to find the meaning of the word ‘depressed’, oftentimes there are words like ‘angry’ or ‘anxious’ surrounding it. Considering the fact that ‘depressed’ was used the same amount of times with those two words, the meaning of ‘depressed’ would be identified as meaning in between the words ‘angry’ and ‘anxious’ (2). Through this approach, researchers are able to know the extent of how certain words are used in a text. The extent can be measured by how distant the two elements are -- as they get close, the degree of expression increases.

The results from the automatic text-based analysis exhibits a new way of analyzing different texts written by school shooters. There is not doubt that this methodology has its flaws. A decision was made to only utilize it when the text is reasonably related to a school shooter. This method can be limited because using vectorial semantics was only tested on words that were theorized previously and how different words can affect the model are unknown. Despite these flaws, this methodology can still be used to examine varying theories related to profiling shooters. Also, because it is done by a machine, a large number of texts can be analyzed at once and when certain words that hint danger are found, professionals can know instantly. There certainly are possibilities for false alarms but this shows that all methodologies in finding potential shooting offenders should be dealt with sensitively.

## 2. Threat Assessment Guide

Similarly, the “threat assessment guide” helped identify possible school shooters back in 2002. It gave schools ways of identifying potential threats and how to respond to active school shooters. This was controversial because the results were from a five year project that profiled assassins who killed many public figures. Despite the differences in target and setting, the

perpetrators have common factors in psychological standpoints proving that the results can be applied when responding to active school shooters. However, readers should know that this guide isn't completely accurate because of contextual differences in the situations.

There are certain steps that schools are recommended to follow according to this guide. First, schools should create a threat assessment team that could collect reports and information of concerning students and determine the risk that they have on the school. This team should have a fixed leader along with members such as a counselor, teachers, mental health professionals, and officers. The next step is that schools should establish lists of behaviors that are unpleasant or improper such as withdrawal, drug abuse, and mental health symptoms. By doing this, the school staff would be able to identify and attempt to fix the problems of a distressed student. The third step is that there should be a central reporting mechanism in which all school staff are trained to recognize students of concern and report them accordingly. There should always be someone to oversee the incoming reports to help anyone who feels like they are in danger. The next step is to decide a threshold in which law enforcement should enter the picture. In scenarios in which people can be in danger, a report should be sent immediately to the police. Afterward, schools should have clear and specific procedures for threat assessment in order to stand in the perspective of a student and analyze how they think.

When a student is finalized as to being a risk to the school, a management plan needs to exist in order to keep on monitoring the student such as support programs and mental health care. The seventh step is to build and advertise the school's safe atmosphere that has safety and trust within the students and teachers. The students should feel safe enough to communicate their concerns freely with the adults. By doing this, students might be able to prevent isolation of specific

students and help identify the distressed students. Lastly, training should take place for everyone involved in the threat assessment process to look towards a unified goal and how to achieve it. This 2002 threat assessment report made by Secret Services can be valuable and a big step towards establishing threat guides in schools. However, these prevention plans do not perfectly ensure safety. Therefore, different responses should also be planned when different threats arise.

### 3. The NETWASS Program

Similar in its approach to the threat assessment guide, the “Networks Against School Shootings” prevention program is a new approach to emergency situations at schools by training teachers to notice warning signs and early mediation of student psychological problems. A study was conducted with 3473 school staff throughout 98 German schools along with a comparison group and three measurement points: pre, post, and 7 months after. The results found increasingly positive effects regarding a teacher’s ability to evaluate students struggling psychologically. Germany, having one of the highest rates of school shootings, started to make anti-bullying programs and emergency response plans. Law enforcement and experts also advocated behavioral threat assessments for schools to use as a prevention technique (Leuschner et al. 68). This assessment is different from normal profiling because it’s provoked by specific threat behavior by a student, not necessarily due to demographics or warning signs.

Though schools are accessible targets for student attacks, it is a good environment to identify these crises and proceed on preventing and intervening. However, this evaluation of student crises can be challenging because of three reasons: lack of staff knowledge on targeted school violence and identifying warning behaviors, school culture that inhibits students to openly communicate their information, and meager cooperation between law enforcement, schools, and

special education services. Solutions should be set up based upon these problems. For example, building a collegial network for counseling and interventions can be a possible solution. The program also needs to match the legal standards of the nation and offense patterns. To demonstrate, there are higher casualty rates of teachers in German school shootings because there are not as much student support staff as there are in American schools. In order to match this, the NETWASS program focuses on teacher training rather than networking systems between multidisciplinary staff.

NETWASS uses a four step processing system. The first stage would be a school staff noticing warning behaviors or actions that may lead to a violent act. If the teacher is unable to assess the student's behavior with the situation, a deeper assessment of the student's situation is needed. In the second stage, the prevention worker should gather more information about the student's situation by getting access to family and official documents. In the third step, the student's information is given to the Crisis Prevention Team (CPT) for assessment -- this part is basically the peak of the model. The CPT consists of prevention workers, a school's principal, school's social workers, and the student's homeroom teacher. Their job is to basically judge whether or not the student has serious warning behaviors for targeted violence and if the individual's situation reflected the vulnerabilities and strain factors of the student. When this evaluation is done, the CPT builds an intervention plan to give as much help as they could to the student and escape the dangerous situation. The last stage of this model is for school staff to case monitor and guarantee a successful intervention. They should also give feedback with important events to the CPT just so if something were to happen, a team could research it.

General results of this study revealed that there was an increase in staff expertise, positive secondary effects, and an ability to identify and help students that are going through psychosocial problems. There were positive secondary effects in teacher-student interaction, school staff cohesion, and feelings of safety that were equal or higher than the evaluation studies. However, there were mainly positive effects from the CTP, but not the school staff. This can be explained by the fact that they were more involved in things like case management. Case management may have a positive impact on feelings of safety but it still needs more investigation.

### Conclusion

As school shootings are on the rise, it is critical to continuously develop prevention programs. More important, further research must be carried out to understand the problem in depth. Currently, there are no successful prevention programs because “success” is difficult to determine when it comes to prevention. Intervention methods such as anti-bullying programs to build camaraderie at schools may be helpful but not enough on its own. There is a need for threat assessment guides to be further examined, in multiple countries in a variety of contexts, to understand its effectiveness. It is also important to educate the parents and school administrators about mental health concerns that may go unnoticed. School counselors may need to perform mental health examinations to determine any warning signs to better understand the students who make up their schools. These actions require full support from government agencies in order to minimize the number of school shootings in American and around the world.

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