



School Safety Newsletter

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Author Q&A: 'School Shooters: Understanding High School, College and Adult Perpetrators'

By Stav Ziv, Newsweek, January 18, 2015

<http://www.newsweek.com/author-qa-school-shooters-understanding-high-school-college-and-adult-300278>

School shootings have pervaded the news and the national conversation in recent years, casting a shadow on what should be safe spaces devoted to learning. Scenes from Columbine, Virginia Tech and Sandy Hook are etched into collective memory as clearly as the questions they conjured: Who are these shooters? Why do shootings happen? How can they be prevented?

Peter Langman, a psychologist who has evaluated potential school shooters and studied incidents across the country and around the world, maintains a trove of resources online and published his first book on the topic, Why Kids Kill: Inside the Minds of School Shooters, in 2010.

In his new book, School Shooters: Understanding High School, College and Adult Perpetrators, released January 16, 2015, Langman presents four dozen brief sketches of shooters. He covers cases ranging from Charles Whitman's 1966 rampage at the University of Texas through Adam Lanza's 2012 massacre of first graders and staff members at Sandy Hook Elementary School, before parsing out themes and addressing prevention.

In a Q&A, Langman discusses patterns that emerged from years of research into school shooters, common misconceptions and warning signs. Edited excerpts follow:

What spurred your research interest in school shooters?

Back in 1999 I was doing my doctoral internship in a hospital for children and adolescents with psychiatric problems. On April 20, 1999 the attack on Columbine High School occurred. Just 10 days later, April 30, a 15-year-old boy was admitted to the psychiatric hospital because he was seen as a risk for going on a Columbine-type rampage. He was the first potential school shooter I had to evaluate but he was not the last. Over the 12 years I was at that organization, each year there'd be one to two kids, sometimes more, coming through the hospital who presented a serious risk of mass violence in schools. So my interest in the topic began kind of out of necessity, because I was dealing with this population of potential shooters.

Originally people were looking for the profile: Who are these kids? What are their characteristics? Can we create a checklist so we recognize them when we see them? But what struck me in the early years of my research was not how similar but how different they were.

What do you think are some of the most common misconceptions or stereotypes about school shooters that you wanted to address, dispel or add nuance to?

One is that the perpetrators are always isolated loners. I think that perception comes from certain cases in which that may have been true, for example Adam Lanza at Sandy Hook. He was profoundly isolated. But most shooters have some level of social connection. If people think they know what a school shooter looks like and they see a kid playing on the football team and socializing with friends and going out with girls, they may assume that kid cannot be a danger. And that would be a dangerous assumption to make.

Another big misconception is that school shooters are virtually always the victims of horrendous bullying that is so bad it drives them to seek retaliation against their tormentors. School shooters have been picked on, but not all of them.

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In almost no case has a school shooter specifically targeted a kid who has picked on them. When there are specific targets—and in over half the cases I’ve studied, there are specific people the perpetrators are seeking to kill—the most common targets are school personnel. Teachers who have given them an unacceptable grade, teachers who’ve failed them for a class, administrators who disciplined them with suspension or expulsion. And the second most common target of school shooters are girls or women, either specific girls that have broken up with them or targeting females as a general population.

Can you describe the three populations of shooters you look at in your book?

As I say in the book, if you just look at the total spectrum of school shooters it’s hard to make sense of anything because there’s just so much variation. But when you break them down into specific groups, you start to see patterns emerge. So one grouping I look at is what I call the population, and I divide them into three populations: secondary school shooters, college shooters and what I call aberrant adult shooters.

What about the three psychological types?

Psychopathic shooters are profoundly narcissistic. It means they’re willing to meet their own needs at the expense of other people, that they don’t experience empathy, guilt or remorse like most people do. [They think] that they’re essentially above the law and that they ought to be able to do whatever they like. So they’re very entitled, and when the world doesn’t give them the gratification they think they’re entitled to they can react with rage.

The second type I present is the psychotic shooter, and psychosis refers to being out of touch with reality. Most commonly it means shooters have experienced the onset of schizophrenia and their psychotic symptoms may take the form of hallucinations, most commonly hearing voices, and/or delusions. The psychotic shooters typically struggle socially and emotionally. They often know there’s something wrong with them, they don’t understand what is going on inside their minds, and they’re full of anguish.

The third type of shooter is the traumatized shooter and unlike the first two—the psychotic and the psychopathic shooters typically come from more or less intact, stable families—the traumatized shooters come from highly dysfunctional families. There’s almost always one parent, if not two, that has drug or alcohol problems; there’s often a criminal history among the parents; there’s often financial stress and poverty; the kids grow up with violence in the home; they’re victims of physical abuse and emotional abuse and sometimes they are also victims of sexual abuse either from within the home or someone outside the home.

Why was it important for you to present brief profiles of a few dozen actual shooters in your book?

To me it’s important to know each case as an individual perpetrator. I could have just presented group data about the different categories, but that would feel kind of disembodied. I think it’s very powerful to read the stories and really get a sense of who these people were and what their lives were like. And then step back and look at them more broadly and compare similarities and differences.

In your book you talk about shifting the conversation from emergency response procedures to prevention. Can you explain?

My impression is that schools across the country have instituted crisis response or emergency response protocols involving lockdown drills and so on. That’s important to minimize damage if there’s an armed intruder in the building, but that is not prevention. Prevention means early detection of potential danger. And to do that you need to know what the warning signs are and schools need to have a team of people trained in threat assessment procedures so when they do become aware of potential warning signs, they know how to investigate and evaluate that threat.

What are the warning signs?

Perhaps the most important one to look out for is what’s called leakage, in which the perpetrators leak their intentions. That can take various forms: Sometimes kids try to recruit a peer to join them in the attack; other times they warn their friends to stay away from school on a certain day because they’re going to commit a shooting; they may ask kids to help them get bombs and firearms; they may brag about what they’re going to do. In many cases, especially among the secondary school shooters, the younger perpetrators, there is a long trail of leakage and if people recognize that and respond promptly, they may be able to prevent attacks.

Monthly Webinars!

First Wednesday of Every Month at 10 am.

Next Webinar - March 4, 2015

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Author Q&A: "School Shooters: Understanding High School, College and Adult Perpetrators' (Continued)

Why are these often missed before the rampages?

If you know the person or you know the family you might just find it impossible to believe that that particular person is capable of committing mass murder. That is a huge hurdle for people to get past, especially if there is no history of violence. They may say, "I've known him all his life, he's always been a good kid, lots of kids say things they don't mean." It's easy to rationalize it. In other cases parents might not want to get their kids in trouble, friends might not want to get kids in trouble. Schools may underreact because they don't want bad publicity, or they're afraid parents might sue them for having stigmatized their kid who hasn't done anything wrong yet, maybe just made a comment or two.

So what can we do?

I think the most important thing is to train school personnel and students in the warning signs of potential violence, and have mechanisms in place where students can easily come forward, anonymously, and make their reports. When school shootings have been prevented, most commonly it's because students reported what they knew. That's probably the best first line of defense, getting students involved in school safety.

What do you hope readers can take away?

The ultimate goal of the book is to help schools and society be safer. And my hope is that by shedding light on the lives of perpetrators and the warning signs they've left, people will be more sensitive to behaviors and know better what to do if they do encounter warning signs.

Can canned goods stop school shooters?

By Katia Hetter, CNN, January 14, 2015

<http://www.cnn.com/2015/01/13/living/feat-students-canned-goods-stop-school-shooters/>

When it's a weapon of self-defense for students to throw at an armed intruder who has just entered their school.

That's one scenario Valley, Alabama, officials are considering as part of their training to respond to school shootings.

Though it may strike some as an insignificant and perhaps even silly response to a deadly problem, it's no joke at W.F. Burns Middle School.

It's part of active shooter response training offered by the ALICE Training Institute, a company founded by a former police officer and former elementary school principal.

School officials have gotten some criticism for sending a letter to parents asking students to bring canned goods to attack would-be intruders.

"We realize at first this may seem odd; however, it is a practice that would catch an intruder off-guard," the letter reads, according to CNN affiliate WRBL. "The canned food item could stun the intruder or even knock him out until the police arrive. The canned food item will give the students a sense of empowerment to protect themselves and will make them feel secure in case an intruder enters the classroom."

Chambers County School Superintendent Kelli Moore Hodge acknowledges that the middle school didn't educate people properly before sending the letter home, but she says the cans are a very small part of the training.

"The major point of the training (which is called ALICE - Alert, lockdown, inform, counter, and evacuate) is to be able to get kids evacuated and not be sitting ducks hiding under desks," Hodge wrote in an email.

Even if you can't escape and are barricaded behind closed doors to avoid the shooter, there are still steps to take to increase your safety, suggests an Auburn University ALICE video. Auburn is providing the training to the school district.

Once the door has been locked and barricaded and students have moved to an area out of sight, students should have a plan if the attacker breaks into the room.

That's when canned goods and other classroom items come into play.

"Start gathering several items you can use to protect yourself. Every room has something you can use to distract and defend from the aggressors' attack," says the Auburn video's narrator. "Communicate with others around you and tell them your plan. Don't wait until the aggressor gets into your safe area to have a plan of action."

Students can throw books, book bags, computers and, yes, those canned goods to distract any aggressor.

More College Freshmen Report Having Felt Depressed

By Alan Schwarz, The New York Times, February 5, 2015

http://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/05/us/more-college-freshmen-report-having-felt-depressed.html?ref=health&_r=0

High numbers of students are beginning college having felt depressed and overwhelmed during the previous year, according to an annual survey released on Thursday, reinforcing some experts' concern about the emotional health of college freshmen.

The survey of more than 150,000 students nationwide, "The American Freshman: National Norms Fall 2014," found that 9.5 percent of respondents had frequently "felt depressed" during the past year, a significant rise over the 6.1 percent reported five years ago. Those who "felt overwhelmed" by schoolwork and other commitments rose to 34.6 percent from 27.1 percent.

Conducted by the Cooperative Institutional Research Program at the University of California, Los Angeles's Higher Education Research Institute for almost 50 years, the survey assesses hundreds of matters ranging from political views to exercise habits. It is considered one of the most comprehensive snapshots of trends among recent high school seniors and is of particular interest to people involved in mental well-being.

"It's a public health issue," said Dr. Anthony L. Rostain, a psychiatrist and co-chairman of a University of Pennsylvania task force on students' emotional health. "We're expecting more of students: There's a sense of having to compete in a global economy, and they think they have to be on top of their game all the time. It's no wonder they feel overwhelmed."

Other survey results indicated that students were spending more time on academics and socializing less — trends that would normally be lauded. But the lead author of the study, Kevin Eagan, cautioned that the shift could result in higher levels of stress.

"Students may be getting the message that they have to take the last year of high school more seriously to get into college, so they're coming in with greater levels of anxiety," Mr. Eagan said. "There may need to be a balance that students need to have at some point, and helping students achieve that balance will be more of a concern on colleges and universities."

Julia Fortier, a freshman at Haverford College in Pennsylvania who graduated last year from the prestigious Horace Greeley High School in Chappaqua, N.Y., said it had not been uncommon for some of her friends to take five Advanced Placement classes in the same year, while also trying to juggle the extracurricular activities expected by college admissions boards.

"You have to get good grades, have all sorts of after-school activities that take up tons of hours, and you have to be happy and social — you have to be everything," Ms. Fortier said. "That's a lot of pressure to live up to sometimes."

Students reported watching considerably less television compared with 2009, with more than half saying they watched less than two hours a week. Not surprisingly, some of that time had shifted to using social networks, on which more than one in four students said they spent more than six hours a week.

Suzanne Ciechalski, a freshman at St. John's University in Queens, said technology that might appear social in nature could in fact lead to stress and feelings of depression.

"I feel like people spend a lot of time on social networks trying to create this picture of who they want to be," Ms. Ciechalski said. "Maintaining that takes a lot of effort. I feel like being a teenager or young adult, the pressure to try and make people see you're the best is really high."

Contrary to some reports of high rates of drinking among high school students, the survey found a continued decline in college freshmen reporting those behaviors. About one-third said they had drunk beer, wine or hard alcohol at least occasionally in the past year, compared with almost half just 10 years ago. Fewer than one in 50 students reported smoking cigarettes.

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