

School Shooters: A Tale of Three Profiles

Summary

School shootings are on the rise in the United States. There were 52 school shootings in 2016. School shootings increased by 25% in 2017, and sadly, there was a year over year 310% increase in school shootings in the first quarter of 2018..ⁱ These numbers include all incidents that involved the presence of guns on or near a school campus, including those that did not result in injuries or fatalities, accidental shootings, suicides without harm to others, and adult-initiated shootings in school parking lots or on the street next to the school in the middle of the night.

Of these 158 shooting incidents since January 2016, we eliminated shootings that were accidental, suicides without harm to others, and adult shootings of other adults near school property, in order to determine if there were identifiable patterns that could be used to develop preventative and reactionary strategies.

32 shootings were identified as causing injuries or deaths to other students or faculty between January 1, 2016 and March 30, 2018. These incidents resulted in 50 deaths and 95 injuries. Our analysis revealed a distinct profile for elementary school shootings, high school/middle school shootings, and university/college shootings.

For example;

- Elementary school shootings were primarily carried out by adults, targeting other adults. Children were injured in a small minority of these shootings by stray bullets intended for the adult.
- High school and middle school shootings were carried out by students or former students. The shooters were primarily minors, under daily supervision and control by parents or guardians. The students lived at home. They attended school during established and predictable hours. The majority of high school and middle school shootings were perpetrated during transition times, while entering or leaving the school.
- University/college students often live on the school campus, and are present on campus for up to 24 hours a day. They are awake, active, and engaged with other students and faculty for most of the day. The variety and number of buildings accessible to students varies significantly. The students are legally adults, no longer under parental control on a daily basis. They are legally able to purchase guns.

We focused our analysis on non-accidental high school and middle school shootings that occurred between Jan 1, 2016 and March 31, 2018.

Is There a Typical High School/ Middle School Shooter?

Three profiles of high school/middle school shooters emerged from our analysis: the Personal vendetta shooter, the Gang-related shooter, and the Mass attack shooter.

Personal Vendetta Shooter

Approximately half of school shootings were to settle personal vendettas. Anger, jealousy, spurned love, and revenge were the most common motivations. The shooter targeted a particular individual. The average age of the shooters was 16.4 years, and the shooters were predominantly male.

Only two shooting incidents were carried out by female adolescents (aged 14 and 15 years). Each shot another female adolescent (aged 15 and 16 years), then turned the gun on themselves, resulting in two separate incidents of murder/suicide.

There was always an existing or past relationship between the shooter and their victim. In one unusual incident, a 14-year-old middle school student shot and killed a 16-year-old high school student whom he had never personally met prior to the shooting.ⁱⁱ According to friends of the 14-year-old shooter, the two arranged to meet after school to settle an ongoing dispute carried on entirely over social media. The shooter brought the handgun to school and showed it off to his friends earlier in the day and suggested that someone might get hurt later. The victim was unarmed.

Overall, there were 12 injuries and 17 deaths resulting from personal vendetta shootings. Twenty-five percent were murder/suicides.

Is there a pattern to when and where personal vendetta shootings occurred?

Most personal vendetta school shootings occurred during transitional periods of school, as students entered or left school. 52% of shootings took place in the morning as students were arriving. 21% occurred as students left at the end of the school day. 13% occurred during the lunch period, and 14% during after-school activities. The majority of after-school shootings occurred in the school parking lot, and the shooter was not a current student of the school. No injuries or deaths occurred in classrooms.

Personal Vendetta Shooter Profile

The personal vendetta shooter was almost always a student at the school. The gun most often belonged to the shooter's parent(s). The gun used in personal vendetta shootings was a handgun. Shooters carried the guns into school in their backpacks. When schools reported the existence of metal detectors, these did not deter gun entry into the school.

The personal vendetta shooter engaged in minimal planning, other than to bring the weapon to school. There was little evidence that they planned an escape. Those that did not immediately commit suicide, belatedly attempted to escape. All shooters were eventually arrested and charged, either as juveniles or adults.

On a few occasions there were unintended victims, who were injured or killed by a stray bullet. However, in the majority of cases, the shooter injured or killed only their intended victim.

Gang-related Shooter Profile

All gang-related shootings took place outside high schools. All the shooters were males. They were older than the personal vendetta shooters, averaging 23 years. They were not current students of the school. Their intended victims were both male and female students of the school. Less than half were drive-by shootings.

Gang-related shooters engaged in more advance planning. They knew when and where they would have an opportunity to shoot their intended victim. They planned their escape, quite often very effectively. Their mind-set differed from that of the personal vendetta shooters. While the gang-related shooter had a specific target, they also had little concern for shooting into a crowd and harming others. This was particularly true in drive-by shootings. Students near the intended victim were recklessly shot.

Gang-related shooters often had one or more accomplices. They openly carried their weapons. The guns used by the shooters were handguns and pellet guns. Gang-related shooters were more likely to have a prior arrest or criminal record. Some were out on bail for violent crimes at the time of the school shooting. In non drive-by gang related shootings, approximately one half of all suspects have been arrested. None of the gang related shooters involved in drive-by shootings have been arrested; all are still at large.

Is there a pattern to when and where gang-related shootings occurred?

No gang-related shootings occurred before noon. Gang-related shootings were more likely to occur at night and in school parking lots. The five events categorized as gang-related shootings accounted for 14 injuries and 1 death. Two of the incidents were drive-by shootings. On one occasion, the fire alarm was pulled to lure the students out of school.ⁱⁱⁱ The students were shot as they ran out of the school.

Mass School Shooter

During the period analyzed, there were 10 school shootings carried out by shooters categorized as having a “mass shooter” profile. Although school shootings that result in many deaths and injuries are the most publicized, there were other school shooters who fit the mass shooter profile. Their actions did not result in significant deaths or injuries. The shooter was subdued by other students, faculty, or school personnel, or the shooter’s weapon malfunctioned. The mass school shooters were either current students, students expelled for dangerous behaviors, students that had dropped out, or graduates. Mass shootings were most often carried out by a single shooter. All mass shooters were males and averaged 16.3 years of age.

Mass school shooters typically displayed some, but not all, of the elements identified as part of the mass school shooter profile.

Mass School Shooter Profile

The mass school shooter typically engaged in significant advance planning. There is evidence that the shooter had contemplated his actions for long periods of time. They were very organized. Some had written timelines leading up to the shooting, including the exact time they would leave for school, the means of getting to school, and a specific event - such as pulling a fire alarm - that would trigger the shooting. Some estimated the number of people they wished to kill, had researched police response times, had worked out a backup plan if their weapon jammed, and how they intended to end the event.

The shooters arrived at the school well prepared and often with multiple weapons (average three, and up to five). Mass shooters stated that they brought multiple weapons to ensure that they had sufficient ammunition to achieve their goal, and to be prepared for a weapon malfunction.

Mass shooters typically used more deadly weapons, including high caliber rifles, assault rifles, semi-automatic and automatic weapons, shotguns, illegally manufactured, altered, or unregistered guns, pipe bombs, and knives. Students brought their weapons to school in backpacks, duffel bags, guitar cases, and oversized coats.

Mass school shooters rarely targeted a specific individual, but intended to shoot large numbers of random individuals. The victims were the most accessible students or faculty members within sight and range of their weapon. In a few cases, the Mass school shooter had an individual target who he expected to be at a particular location, but when that individual was not immediately visible, they shot randomly at anyone who was at that location.

Most mass school shooters had a history of depression, rage at personal circumstances, history of mental illness, or symptoms of undiagnosed mental illness. This was evidenced by a spectrum of attributes, including lack of empathy, paranoid behavior, delusions, obsessive-compulsive behavior, previous diagnosis of Asperger syndrome, oppositional defiance disorder, and/or previous suicide attempt.

Several of the students were on medication for depression, anxiety, or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). In several cases, medication was being abused. Some of the shooters had recently increased medication dosage, and others had stopped taking prescribed medication, often because parental supervision was lacking. There was sometimes evidence of illegal drug use (e.g., methamphetamine).

The majority of mass shooting events ended with suicide or attempted suicide. Two shooters committed suicide with the same gun that they used to shoot their random targets. When the shooter did not directly shoot himself, he created circumstances that would result in his being shot by another person, generally law enforcement. For example, two students shot directly at law enforcement agents, ensuring that the officer would shoot back at them, effectively causing their suicides.^{iv v} In another case, the shooter shot a student, then offered his gun to his victim and

begged him to kill him.^{vi} Another student attempted to commit suicide, but his gun jammed. Several shooters had previously expressed suicidal ideation.

There was substantial evidence of psychopathic or frank psychotic behavior in many shooters. Several of the mass school shooters began their shooting spree by killing family members at home. A 14-year-old mass school shooter had a history of beating animals to death with stones and boards.^{vii} He had been expelled from school for bringing a hatchet and machete to school. A 15-year-old decided that he would flip a coin, and if it came up heads, would initiate his school shooting spree, and if it came up tails, he would not. Law officers found two coins on the ground in the student's home - one tails up, and one heads up.^{viii} Another 15-year-old stated that he wanted to initiate a shooting spree as an experiment, to see how others, the police, and society would react and what it would be like to be in prison.^{ix}

At least 50% of mass school shooters expressed their intentions on social media, and the vast majority had shared their intentions with friends or posted videos of their intentions on YouTube. Some mass school shooters demonstrated a general fascination with guns or specific fascination with previous school shootings, sometimes repeatedly watching documentaries of such shootings. Several shooters had been expelled due to violent or threatening behavior, or for bringing weapons to school.

Recommendations to further strengthen your School Shooter Response Program

1. Periodically, educate students and staff defining “suspicious” or “dangerous” behaviors.
2. Provide students with a safe and confidential reporting procedure.
3. Educate students and staff to immediately report “impending danger.”
 - a. The ability to report “impending danger” must be simple, and able to be carried out within seconds.
4. Establish high vigilance surveillance during transition times at school.
 - a. 52% of school shootings occur as students enter school in the morning.
 - b. 21% of school shootings occur as students exit schools in the afternoon.
 - c. 14% of school shootings occur in the cafeteria during lunchtime.
 - d. Mass school shooters often assemble their weapons in the bathroom.
5. Close or limit access to parking lots after dark.

ⁱ Gunfire on school grounds in the United States,” Everytown, Last modified 2018, <https://everytownresearch.org/gunfire-in-school/>

ⁱⁱ “Facebook arguments over a girl preceded shooting outside Utah middle school,” The Salt Lake Tribune, November 22 2016.

ⁱⁱⁱ Stan Forman, “Student Killed, 3 Others Injured in Shooting Near Dorchester School,” WCV Boston, June 9, 2016, <http://www.wcvb.com/article/student-killed-3-others-injured-in-shooting-near-dorchester-school/8235900>

^{iv} McLaughlin, Elliot C, “Suspect in Wisconsin prom shooting dies, police say,” CNN, April 24, 2016, <https://www.cnn.com/2016/04/24/us/wisconsin-shooting-school-prom/index.html>

^v Parker Perry, “West Liberty suspect asked victim to shoot him, report says,” Springfield News-Sun, Wednesday 25, 2017, <https://www.springfieldnewssun.com/news/crime--law/west-liberty-suspect-asked-victim-shoot-him-report-says/4lq9BECsel09rIWS0Pk1HJ/>

^{vi} S.C Anderson, “Detective: Teen said gun jam stopped school Shooting carnage,” WRDR, February 12, 2018, <http://www.wrdw.com/content/news/Detective-Teen-said-gun-jam-stopped-school-shooting-carnage-473819173.html>

^{vii} Amy Rock, "Teen Gets 23 years for West Liberty- Salem High School Shooting," Campus Safety News, May 3, 2018,
<https://www.campussafetymagazine.com/safety/west-liberty-salem-high-school-shooting/>

^{viii} "Docs: Accused Freeman HS shooter flipped a coin to make decision to do shooting," KREM-TV, September 27, 2017,
<https://www.krem.com/article/news/local/tragedy-in-freeman/docs-accused-freeman-hs-shooter-flipped-a-coin-to-make-decision-to-do-shooting/293-479181983>

^{ix} Matt Markgraf, "Detective Detail 'Bizarre' and 'Shockingly Calm' Interview with Marshall Shooting Suspect," WKMS, March 6 2018,
<http://wkms.org/post/detectives-detail-bizarre-and-shockingly-calm-interview-marshall-shooting-suspect>