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## **CULTIVATION AND REPORTING OF CAMPUS THREATS**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The consumption of media has been established as one of the elements responsible for changing the general population's perceptions. Specifically, cultivation theory (depending on the amount of media use) points to an enhanced representation of a characterization conveyed through the media. This depiction has the potential to create an inaccurate portrayal (stereotype) leading to an increased level of anxiety. The proliferation of reported incidents (real or perceived) associated with mass shootings in the U.S. over the last 20 years is an example. This paper traces the relatively recent coverage of mass shootings in the U.S. by the media and the side effects on the school environment. Included are factors that contribute to an increase of reports concerning violence and shootings. Followed by a discussion of components that may be responsible for this escalation and an examination of the procedures that could be put into place to handle this increase.

*Keywords:* Media, Cultivation Theory, College Campuses, Mass Shootings, Behavioral Intervention Teams, Active Bystander

### **INTRODUCTION**

Mass shootings in schools became more frequent in the last 20 some odd years. From 1999 – 2014 there were 124 days between shootings. Between 2015 and 2018 there were 77 days between shootings (Are School Shootings Becoming More Frequent, 2019). Accompanying this increased frequency of shootings is a rise in number of reports, both false and accurate. A “false report” is one that is made by “...a person who, with intent to deceive, knowingly makes a false statement” (USLEGAL.com, 2020). This means that the false report is required to carry with it the intent to harm. An inaccurate report does not carry the intent aspect, rather, it simply could mean that someone erroneously reported the information or did so without having knowledge of all aspects of the situation. These are known as “false positives” (Sokolow, Lewis, Van Brunt, Schuster & Swinton 2015).

This false report phenomenon may be based on traumatic events experienced by individuals, misperceptions, or simply intended to be malicious hoaxes (Miller, 2019). Most reports of live false shootings are based on loud gun fire like sounds. Examples of the type of sounds that have invoked this sort of response includes balloons popping, a malfunctioning water heater, the crushing of bottles, and a motorcycle backfiring (Berman & Smith 2019; Miller, 2019).

The other major category of false reports concerning mass shootings is based on the perception that a shooting is going to occur. This assumption may be founded on some kind of information that has been transmitted or imagined. In many instances a posting on social media sets off a chain of events that leads to a false report. Kingkade (2019) writes that a majority of the mass shooting perpetrators post some kind of message on a public forum before they commit the act. Logically it makes sense that interpretations of a post can lead to false reports / alarms. Kingkade quoting a student “Everyone is on edge more; everything is taken out of proportion . . . Teenagers haven’t changed. It’s just with social media, they see it now - schools and everyone -and it changes everything” (para 4). While well intentioned, law enforcement and school officials have no alternative other than to treat each potential threat as real until it’s not.

Kingkade contends that the rise in the level of reporting results from the recent emergence of the “See Something-Say Something” campaigns post 9/11. The encouragement of individuals to report what they see to avoid future tragedies combined with the increased awareness of such events, work together to multiply reports after an incident. Concerned administrators are placed on heightened alert after an event. Their perception also adds to the increased number of reports after these incidents. Bosman (2018) noted that after the Stoneman-Douglas shooting, reports ramped up significantly. “Florida had at least 31 incidents in the week after the shooting, more than any other state, followed by Ohio, with 29; and Kentucky was third, with 24. Other states that experienced unusually high numbers of threats, false alarms or other incidents included California, Georgia, Mississippi, New York, Texas and Virginia” (para 6). An alternative explanation for the false reporting of mass shootings may have to do with the portrayal of the shooters in the media. The media coverage of these mass shooting events is often unavoidable. As the story unfolds it is looked at from every conceivable angle and repeatedly revisited hundreds of times. Cultivation Theory (a Communication Theory) specifically addresses the perceptions of television viewers-based consumption and depiction in the media.

### **CULTIVATION THEORY**

Cultivation theory (aka cultivation analysis) is a theory composed originally by G. Gerbner and later expanded upon by Gerbner & Gross (1976). Gerbner began research in the mid-1960s endeavoring to study media effects, specifically whether watching television influences the audience’s idea and perception of everyday life, and if so, how. Cultivation theory postulates that high frequency viewers of television are more susceptible to media messages and the belief that they are real and valid.

Cultivation theory is one of the main branches of media effects research. Cultivation theorists posit that television viewing can have long-term effects that gradually affect the audience. Their primary focus falls on the effects of viewing and the changes in the perception of the viewer. The theory asserts that television does not so much persuade us, as paint a convincing picture of what the world is like (West & Turner, 2018).

Heavy viewers of TV are thought to be ‘cultivating’ viewpoints that seem to believe that the world created by television is an accurate depiction of the real world. This occurs through a process called Mainstreaming. Mainstreaming is the constructing of a social reality that is based upon cultural

dominance. Heavy television viewers develop more commonality with other heavy viewers no matter the background as long as they share the dominate culture (p. 410).

Resonance is another element within Cultivation Theory and expands on the way cultivation can operate. Resonance is “a behavior that occurs when a viewer’s lived reality coincides with the reality pictured in the media” (p. 411). Essentially, if a heavy viewer of television lives in an environment that is similar to the one replicated in a television setting the cultivation effect is augmented. Gerbner (1998) refers to this as providing “a double dose of messages that resonate and amplify cultivation” (p. 182).

Cultivation as a result of mainstreaming or resonance generates effects at two distinct levels: “first order – learning facts from the media and second order – learning values and assumptions from the media” (West & Turner, 2018, p. 411). First order deals with more concrete facts, such as percentages – how many police officers fire their gun a year? The second order deals with overall concepts – should police officers be allowed to carry a gun?

The theory suggests that this cultivation of beliefs is based on a mindset already present in our society and that the media take those positions which are already present and display them bundled in a different packaging to their audiences. One of the main tenets of the theory is that television and media cultivate the status quo, they do not challenge it. Many times, the viewer is unaware the extent to which they absorb media, portraying themselves as moderate viewers when, in fact, they are heavy viewers.

The delta between those considered to be light viewers and heavy viewers is called the cultivation differential. This describes the extent to which a viewpoint on a particular topic is shaped by exposure to television.

One notable and often discussed piece of the theory is known as the “mean world syndrome”. In a nutshell, heavy viewing of television and the associated violence leads the viewer to believe that the world is a much more dangerous place than it is, with a possible serial killer, terrorist or rapist lurking around every corner.

Cultivation theory is mostly known for its preoccupation of the study of violence exhibited on television. In fact, the development of this theory led to the creation of the Violence Index – a yearly content analysis of primetime network programming to determine the amount of violence represented (p. 406). However, while a vast amount of cultivation studies are concerned with violence there are several that have expanded to cover gender, demographics, cultural representations, and political leanings among others.

## **SCHOOL SHOOTINGS**

Over the last couple of decades society seems to be portrayed as becoming more uncivilized. The stories that are spread often point to death, destruction, spitefulness, and a general community anger. It seems as if every day a story concerning violence and particularly mass shootings is reported. Mass shootings did not get a lot of attention until they entered school zones. Approximately 20 years ago, possibly the most notorious shooting in U.S. schools transpired – the

**Columbine Massacre.** On April 20, 1999 at Columbine High School, two shooters opened fired killing 13 people. This event seems to be the catalyst of a long string of mass school shootings. Mass school shootings are defined as an incident in which 4 or more victims, not including the suspect are killed (Smart 2018). While no shootings should be minimized some had a wider effect than others. In addition, several of these shootings did not make national news coverage as they resulted in few fatalities.

In the two decades since the Columbine massacre, there have been 231 school shootings in the United States. As the timeline is followed the next mass school shooting occurred on March 21, 2005 at Red Lake Senior High School, Red Lake, MN. There were 7 deaths and 5 injured. In this incident 1<sup>st</sup> responders arrived quickly enough to injure the shooter before the shooter ultimately turned the gun on himself.

A little over a year later October 2, 2006, another mass school shooting transpired at West Nickel Mines School in Nickel Mines, PA. In this instance there were 5 victims - all girls. The shooter targeted only girls allowing the boys and adults to escape.

Arguably, the next most infamous case of a school shooting was at Virginia Tech on April 16, 2007. In this event 32 victims were killed. This particular occurrence has the distinction of being the deadliest school shooting in U.S. History. The shooter had time to visit multiple campus locations.

On February 14, 2008, Northern Illinois University in Dekalb, IL was the ensuing location of a mass school shooting. Five people were killed, and 16 others were injured. According to the police report Columbine had influenced this shooter (Northern Illinois University Report 2008). Within the following 4 years school shootings had occurred but none of these incidents rose to the mass category level. On April 2, 2012, Oikos University in Oakland, CA. had the unfortunate distinction of being the next school to suffer a shooting. The shooting was the 4<sup>th</sup> deadliest on an American College Campus, as 7 people were killed.

Eight months later, on December 14<sup>th</sup>, 2012, the event that debatably brought schools shootings back to the public conscientious occurred - the Sandy Hook Elementary School Massacre. There were more than 26 deaths associated with this incident. The news coverage was so prevalent that the President of the United States wiped away a tear while discussing it (Keneally, 2019). This shooting also resulted in a push for Federal changes in the gun laws.

Following Sandy Hook within a year, on June 7, 2013 a mass shooting occurred at Santa Monica College, Santa Monica, CA. Five people were killed by a shooter who was described as “ready for battle” (para. 41) since he had so much weaponry and was wearing a protective vest.

The next shooting occurred on October 24, 2014 at Marysville-Pilchuck High School, Marysville, WA. Four students were fatally shot by another student who had arranged for a meeting to take place during lunch.

The following year on October 1, 2015, nine victims were shot on the Umpqua Community College Campus. This shooting seemed to resonate with the American Politicians for a call toward gun control.

The mass school shootings looked as if they were going to subside until February 14, 2018 - the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, Parkland, FL. Shooting. There were 17 deaths in this event. The reaction to this particular shooting differed from the others. The teens who survived this attack launched a national push for gun control, resulting in the March For Our Lives Rally. Approximately 3 weeks after, Florida passed new gun laws. Which in turn sparked a “student-led push for gun reform” across the country (Shapiro, 2018).

Three months later another shooting occurred on May 18, 2018 at Santa Fe High School in Santa Fe, TX. Ten people were killed during this mass school shooting.

Is this rise of reported shootings on campus a reflection of societal change, or a result of the media’s increased reach? With the help of new technology and the advent of social media, public access has exploded. Not only does the public consume the various media but they also create it. The formats used to disseminate and create information have merged and converged. This convergence has allowed a consumer to create, distribute, and devour content through one device – the mobile telephone.

## **CONTRIBUTING FACTORS**

### **News Media**

The uniqueness of television has possibly impacted the rise of shootings within the U.S. by displaying many instances both real and fictional within its broadcasted content. Television is fundamentally different from all other forms of media. Initially, except for the cost of the receiver – it is free to watch. In the U.S. alone it is estimated that 120.6 million homes contain television sets (Nielson, 2019). Television is the most used media to receive local news (Pew Research Center 2019).

The television medium is ageless, as all age groups consume the flat screen. To watch television, you don’t need to know how to read. In addition, there are a myriad amount of studies that suggest television has a lot of influence and shapes the way people think and relate (Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, Signorielli & Shanahan, 2002).

Arguably the news media’s reporting of shooters across the U.S. has led to an increase in activity. The sensationalizing of these news stories and the exploits of the shooters, the victims, and the survivors has created a notorious path to fame. In some respects, the fame is based on characteristics, while in others it is based on heroics, and sympathy.

Typically, memorials are held, and reminders are placed at the scene. In many cases, protests are organized. Survivors are interviewed and their accounts of the shooting are dissected by both traditional and fringe media. Perhaps, leading to conspiracy theories and multiple accusations from among various players.

This notorious fame as a result of the event seems to be a reflection of the role of the media. Every time there is a mass shooting, it appears to turn into a media circus in which every aspect is scrutinized. The behavior of the person doing the shooting is analyzed in depth, searching for the underlining cause. The victim's lives are put under a microscope (whether they survived or not). The movements of the first responders as well as the actors on scene are inspected. The policies of organizations are examined. Every action or reaction from every person involved is studied. In addition, because of the timeliness of the various means used to receive the breaking news associated with a shooting- the public becomes a participant. Voyeurs rush to the scene, family members arrive to the area trying to find their relatives and would be heroes arm themselves and scurry to the location.

## **Political**

The media spotlight does not end after the initial event. The event and the players become elevated as it is used as a political tool to further specific agendas. Politicians have routinely utilized noteworthy events to catapult their issues into the spotlight. Taking advantage of the collective attention on a significant event such as a school shooting should not be a surprise.

After the Sandy Hook shootings in Connecticut, calls for both gun control and more services for the mentally ill quickly became the rally cry. President Obama commented that he "...would do everything in his power to "engage" in a dialogue with Americans, including mental health professionals and law enforcement" (Tapper & Larotonda 2012, para 2). There were similar comments made by both Sen. Joe Manchin and Sen. Ted Cruz.

Equally, comments were made by those opposed to any restrictions on firearms. Congressman Louie Gohmert of Texas opined that he wished the principal had an assault rifle in her office to protect the students of the school. Similarly, conservative talk show host Mark Levin commented about the greater need to protect life, citing the Oklahoma City bombing as an example (Kim 2012).

Similar arguments have erupted after almost every mass shooting or mass violence event. So why has the needle not moved in either direction? Both sides of the argument claim to have the moral high ground related to the issue, whether it be linking the crime to the availability of guns or a constitutional mandate. However, those in the debate seek the argument most closely affiliated with their world view, using the surveys or opinion to bolster their points. Thus, embracing the Rahm Emanuel philosophy, "Never let a good crisis go to waste" (Emanuel, n.d., para 1) – in the move to score points with the base and ensure reelection or increase political positioning.

A Pew Research Center poll found that Americans have a "complex relationship" with guns, with approximately "seven-in-ten, including the 55% of those who have never personally owned a gun – say they have fired a gun at some point (Parker, Horowitz, Igielnik, Oliphant & Brown, 2017). The author goes on to write that the feelings that gun owners have towards their guns is equally resolute as those opposed to them. With both parties being represented in congress, it is not surprising that the needle fails to move. Regardless of the situation or scenario tragedies such as the one at Sandy Hook become an opportunity to engage others in the conversation. With the hope

that this time, more will see the world from their point of view and finally get the change they seek.

## **Entertainment**

The entertainment industry in general has gloried shootings in films, as well as video games. While there is no direct proof that the violence portrayed in movies or games leads to a mimicking of behavior, there are other indicators that suggest that the option for violence is at very least is an alternative. The link between exposure to violent media and aggressive behavior is easily drawn (Romano, 2019). The fact that the majority of video games have violent themes cannot be understated.

In addition, advertisers would not spend billions of dollars a year if they did not think the various conduits within the entertainment industry influenced people to buy stuff. Similarly, the same conclusions that advertisers use can be drawn concerning the portrayal of violence within the industry (Strauss, 2019). The depiction of violence within the industry is bound to have some impact on the end consumers – perhaps leading to the differing roles taken by the participants of the shooting event.

## **Marketing**

As mass shootings become more ingrained into the public consciousness companies try to capitalize by creating products designed to protect on-campus members – primarily children. Most of the for-sale products developed have to do with personal protection from an attack. Bullet Proof Backpacks are one of the choices. BulletBlocker, a company that sells bulletproof backpacks has seen sales jump 300 percent since the Florida shooting. Major retailers such as Home Depot and Bed, Bath and Beyond carry this type of backpack (Chan, 2019). Bulletproof hoodies are also a popular choice from makers such as Wonder Hoodie. Wonder Hoodie offers a free replacement “If you get shot (God forbid) with our hoodies on” (Kid’s, 2020, para 12). Another choice marketed for your offspring’s use during school shootings are bulletproof blankets. These blankets are designed to specifically shield small children from gunfire” (Moss, 2015, para 1). Bullet proof vests are another option. A search on the shopping site Amazon.com yields 233 results for “Bulletproof Vests for Kids” (Bulletproof, 2020).

It might be a sign of the times, but it doesn’t appear to take advertisements to sell these products. Parents who have experienced these traumatic shootings seek out these protective devices. Thousands of Americans are searching for security through an explosion of products marketed to those scared of being shot or of losing loved ones to gun violence (Chan, 2019).

## **EDUCATIONAL RELATED ASPECTS**

The reality of the school shootings being considered routine or commonplace is not accurate. The number of mass shootings and those injured in the violence remains relatively low when examining all of the deaths caused by gun violence. The Gun Violence Archive reports a total of 15,858 deaths by gun in 2019, with 135 of those deaths due to a mass shooting event (.009%). Suicide clearly represents the greatest total of the deaths by gun representing over 50% of those who perish by



firearms (Gun Violence Archive, 2020). However, the reality as experienced by both parents and children attending schools allude to growing concerns and anxiety related to feeling safe in school. According to a Gallup poll, 35% of parents reported feeling concerned about their off-spring's safety in school. This includes a rise in student reporting of anxiety when asked about feeling safe in school (Jones, 2018). This fear has increased 3-fold from 12 percent to 34 percent in the last 5 years (Washburn, 2018). Although this number is high, it was not as high as post Columbine when a similar poll was administered. Jones (2018) suggests that this may be the result of desensitization or a normalization of school shootings.

To that end, in many cases parents have started to think of ways to safeguard their children. In some cases, parents are arming their children with self-protection items including hockey sticks, mini baseball bats, and rocks to help with their defense. In addition, to increase the odds of survival, parents are purchasing skateboards for their kids to be used to break windows and escape if necessary (Gajanan, 2019). In the instance of hostage situations or kidnappings parents are supplying their children with GPS trackers designed specifically for kids (Schuster 2018).

The tightening of security at schools may help to lessen the fear factor. Relative recent security changes include security booths outside of the main entrance. A visitor tag is issued and required to pass that point. By using visitor tags, school systems make it easier for staff members to identify who should be and who should not be on school grounds.

Surveillance cameras are another tool that has been incorporated for best practices of school safety. Indoor surveillance cameras are used in many locations within the school to keep students, staff members and others who are inside safe. They are employed to monitor those who enter from the outside of the building, as well as within classrooms, hallways, and gymnasiums. Outdoor surveillance cameras are placed on the perimeter of the property including in the parking lot, playgrounds along with other exterior areas of the campus.

Metal Detectors are extra devices that are used to prevent students, parents and others from bringing weapons into the school building. Portable metal detectors can be setup for afterschool events such as, football games, and graduation ceremonies. Armored doors and bulletproof windows are installed to stop bullets from penetrating the classroom. An additional gadget that can be mounted is a Justinkase. this is a metal device that is placed under a door and latches to the door jamb to prevent anyone from entering. If the door lock is shot out, the Jusitnkase can keep the door shut (Top 5 Security Products to Keep Our Children Safe, 2013).

The assigning of police officers to schools is an additional strategy that has found traction. In 2016 42% of all public schools in the U.S. had a school resource officer present on campus. Their mandate is to “serve various roles: safety expert and law enforcer, problem solver and liaison to community resources, and educator” (Raymond 2010 para. 1).

Lipscomb (2019) noted, 41 states and Washington DC had mandatory drills that were meant to prepare students in the event of a lockdown or code red. The goal of these safety training strategies is to minimize mass casualties in the event of an active shooter or active threat. These drills teach rapid lockdown and evacuation strategies. Referred to as “active shooter training”, some kids learn to run and hide as early as preschool.

These measures are in direct opposition to the efforts made by parents in the 1970's, who sought to have the impact of schools limited by controlling the access to student records. The Family Educational Right to Privacy Act (FERPA) sought to limit access of records to only those with a legitimate educational purpose for accessing such records. However, since the advent of social media, coupled with public demand, school administrators have increasingly needed to plunge themselves into student's private lives. Without this involvement, the schools leave themselves open to accusations of missing critical signs that could otherwise prevent school violence.

## CAUSALITY

Violence in school, whether it is secondary or post-secondary is not a new phenomenon. Issues surrounding school bullying have been well documented and, in some cases, romanticized. Many authors as well as movies such as Charles Dickens with *Oliver Twist*, and the Christmas Story, have romanticized the notion of bullying as a rite of passage to be overcome. There were also reports in an 1862 London Times article regarding a murder involving two soldiers. The story detailed that the accused, John Flood, was subjected to bullying which caused him to act. His sentence was ultimately overturned by the Queen (History of Bullying, 2012).

While the majority of bullying or issues of school violence do not result in deaths or mass killing, when such reports surface, there is significant attention paid to the incident. There are many famous, or now infamous, attacks that have captured national attention. The reports center around not only the deaths that have occurred, but also focus on the causality. This would be a normal response as we try to avoid having history repeat itself. However, in an effort to explain, often times there are attempts to reduce the event to a single cause, such a bullying, or access to weapons. While both could be considered contributing factors, certainly neither are considered to be factors that stand in isolation.

When one looks at many of the immediate reactions to school violence, the majority of the efforts appear to be levied toward a singular causality. Finding singular causality is something that appeals to most people as it gives individuals the illusions that they have some control over issues that they know that they cannot control. As an example, in looking at reports coming from the aftermath of the Stoneman Douglas shootings, a commission was authorized to examine the events and make recommendations. What the commission determined was not focused on the prevention of the violence. It was focused on the reactions to it. As Pinellas County Sheriff Bob Gualtier stated, "It is going to happen again. Anybody who thinks it's not going to happen again is just being unrealistic, is being naïve and probably has their head in the sand. It is going to happen again" (News Service of Florida, 2019, para 3). This ceded that the best defense was how to minimize the body count and abandon efforts to prevent these terrible events from occurring again.

Many of the schools who experienced violence appeared to invest in the strategy of focusing on the physical presence in the schools. When analyzing the attacks, 80% of the schools that were involved in the shootings had some sort of physical security measure in place. Close to a quarter of these schools had a lockdown procedure and 46% had a school resource officer. Another important fact discovered was that 51% of the attacks ended without any external intervention (Protecting America's Schools, 2019).

In the Stoneman Douglas shooting, the Sheriff's department assigned an armed deputy to the school with the intent of securing it. The armed presence was to act as deterrent to would be attackers, as well as to respond if violence were to break out. However, as was determined by the Commission, the deputy hid in safety as the shootings were occurring. While giving a cursory nod to the prevention methods available, the commission focused significant efforts on the response and mitigation of the threat (Marjory Stoneman Commission Report, 2019). Similar findings came as the result of the Columbine, Sandy Hook and Oregon task forces.

What is also consistent among these reports is that efforts need to be taken to improve the climate of the schools. The improvement of the relationships between faculty and staff, schools and the communities they serve, and the reporting of concerning behaviors are seen as equal in efficacy to the overall response. Johns Hopkins University (Sheldon, 2019) found that in schools with active improvement programs a majority of the respondents reported a feeling that their institutions were safer. Of course, the resources of the schools and locations also influenced the perception related to safety.

An additional finding was that the schools that were involved in the study did not report that they had significant concerns or problems with school safety. This is in agreement with the study of crime in schools. In the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) report they determined that most crimes transpiring in the schools (both violent and nonviolent) did not occur in any greater number than those outside of the school.

In 2019, the United States Secret Service commissioned a study titled Protecting America's Schools: A U.S. Secret Service Analysis of Targeted School Violence that specifically looked at violence in schools and more importantly how to prevent it. For this study a detailed analysis of targeted school violence was conducted. In particular, the study investigated past attacks and examined causality, school prevention methods, weapons being used and resolution. The focus of the study was on middle and high school incidents.

One of the significant findings of the (Protecting America's Schools) study was that there was no cookie cutter or consistent profile of the attackers on the schools. While the majority are white males (63%), no other factors indicated a tendency or proclivity towards violence. Variations in the grades of the attackers, motives, socioeconomic backgrounds were such that there cannot be a direct line drawn to effectively prevent incidents based on these measures.

An added issue that has been prominently tied to causality is in the area of mental illness. "According to national prevalence rates, nearly 20% of children are diagnosed with at least one mental health and/or behavioral disorder" (p. 23). While 91% had psychological, behavioral and neurological/developmental disorders, it should be realized that the majority of people who are diagnosed in these categories do not commit violent crimes. However, in a study of attitudes about mental health, the perception by most individuals (74%) in assessing others indicates that the majority of people get their opinions and knowledge of mental illness from the media and not from mental health professionals (Borinstein, 2020). The same study also indicates that 81% of those surveyed believed the best way to deal with mentally ill people was to "put them behind a locked door".

These attitudes have created a “boogey man” where those with mental illness are considered to be a danger to others. Findings such as those that have been attributed to the Stoneman Douglas and the Sandy Hook shootings, where the firearms were obtained by someone who was considered to have a mental illness only seek to further the link between mental illness and violence. Recent legislation has sought to create “red flag” laws where those who have had a mental health issue are to have firearms taken from them by force (Szabo, 2019). However, as has been documented in the Protecting America’s Schools findings, the linkage between mental illness and violence is not founded in the data.

Additionally, as written in the Protecting America’s Schools report there are few consistencies among the attackers. One hundred percent of the attackers experienced some stressors, including social stressors. Sixty-six percent of these individuals also had multiple motivations that could be attributed to these stressors. However, these stresses are no greater than others have experienced. Eighty-nine percent of the attackers had shared “concerning communications” within two days of the attack and 66% had clearly indicated their attack to their intended targets (Protecting America’s Schools, 2019, p. 47).

In analyzing the data that has emerged from the Protecting America’s Schools in an attempt to find a known profile or enough commonalities to compare school shooters, the outcome is clear: There is no such animal. There exists such a wide variety of circumstances, personalities, and lived experiences that it would be impossible to predict the exact formula for what creates a school shooter.

Many schools invested heavily in physical presence and barriers to prevent school violence. However, these actions that taken place at secondary schools, where entry points can be limited and the population within the school can be relatively easily controlled. Unfortunately, this does not translate to a higher education setting. Bound by different physical spaces and an expectation of open access, Universities have vulnerabilities even under the best of conditions. Therefore, a different methodology relative to identifying and preventing threats at the University level is required.

## **HIGHER EDUCATION DYNAMICS**

On April 16, 2007, a lone gunman, Seung Hui Cho, shot 32 students and faculty on the campus of Virginia Tech University, before taking his own life. The scale of the loss of life shocked the Higher Education community. The governor of the Commonwealth of Virginia, Tim Kaine, put together a panel to “...seek answers to the many questions that would arise from the tragedy” (Mass shootings at Virginia Tech, 2007, p. vii). The report that was developed, then became the blueprint for campuses to follow and to act upon to prevent other such tragedies from occurring in the future.

The scope of the review by the committee was sufficiently broad so as to allow a complete review of all laws, policies and campus responses. The report addressed many issues that exposed shortcomings of higher education policies, campus security, access to campus buildings, campus alert systems training for educators, and laws on the state and federal level. The net result was a series of sweeping reforms across multiple platforms in an effort to address the areas of concern.

At the campus level, one of the most significant findings was that “University officials in the office of Judicial Affairs, Cook Counseling Center, campus police, the Dean of Students, and others did not communicate with one another or with Cho’s parents - noting their beliefs that such communications were prohibited by the federal laws governing the privacy of health and education records” (p. 2). The knowledge that each department had concerning Cho’s mental health, odd behavior and classroom submissions was never brought together to assess the level of impairment, or the full level of danger that was about to be unleashed on the campus. The report made note “Although various individuals and departments with the University knew about each of these incidents, the University did not intervene effectively. No one knew all the information, so no one connected all the dots” (p. 2). Addressing this issue requires cross functional teams to be developed in order to assess behaviors and to evaluate threats to University campuses.

This finding created the foundation of what would become Behavioral Intervention Teams (BIT). The purpose of the BIT teams is to facilitate “the identification and support of individuals who demonstrate behaviors that may be early warning signs of possible troubled, disruptive or violent behavior” (The Value of Campus Behavioral Intervention Teams, 2016, para. 1).

Other major changes that are linked to violence on campus included the debate related to whether or not to allow guns on campuses. In Virginia, the panel recommended that the ability to “regulate the possession of firearms on campus if it so desires” (Mass shootings at Virginia Tech, 2007, p. 76) remains with the institution. This was included in the report because Cho was in violation of the campus firearm policy when he came armed onto campus. However, there was an equal debate that the lack of firearms made campuses less safe, therefore making colleges fertile ground for massacres such as Virginia Tech. Although the clear majority of campuses still restrict the ability of students to carry on campus, states, such as Arkansas, Colorado, Georgia, Idaho, Kansas, Mississippi, Ohio, Oregon, Utah, Tennessee, Texas and Wisconsin have laws in effect that allow students to carry on campus (The Campaign to Keep Guns off Campus, n.d.). The issue of whether or not to allow guns on campus as a means of curtailing future acts of violence at universities remains hotly debated.

### **SUGGESTIONS TO MINIMIZE INCIDENTS**

As campuses encourage students, faculty and staff to report concerning behavior, it is understood that there are a large number of false positive reports. This in part, is due to the wide variety of experiences influencing each individual, that ultimately determines how they will interpret and react to situations. However, the desire to gain as much information as possible by school and university officials requires that there be a low threshold for reporting. While maintaining the low threshold, it is also critical to create a culture where reporting concerning behavior is a norm. There needs to be clear expectations of community members to relay information to be acted upon. Similarly, the response of the institution needs to be predictable and transparent as well. By outlining both the expectations and response, the institution can begin to mitigate barriers to reporting,

One of the most effective strategies for managing narratives is to have a well-trained BIT, that is able to discern what reports have potential to grow into serious situations and which reports will require being set aside. The BIT will work to develop plans and intervention strategies meant to

assist students in supporting both the students who have reported the behaviors, but also the individuals who have been identified. By creating these cross functional teams, it ensures that a holistic approach and review is brought to bear. The net result is that campuses are more likely to identify issues early and thus help in preventing tragedies such as those at Virginia Tech.

An added tool in the arsenal is training. Training should focus on learning to recognize signs of students who may be escalating and to report those behaviors as soon as they become aware of the potential for harm, thus creating a group of “active bystanders.” Active bystander is defined as “someone who not only witnesses a situation but takes steps to speak up or step in to keep a situation from escalating or to disrupt a problematic situation” (Safety Net Coalition, n.d.). The reason why this becomes a critical step is that frequently attackers will give clues as to their impending attacks. The Protecting America’s Schools (2019) study found in examination of 35 attackers, that “100% of them exhibited concerning behaviors prior to their attack” (p. 43) and that approximately one third of these displayed their intent online. However, “two-thirds of these were observed by classmates or adults and were not reported” (p. 44). Teaching people what to look for as well as how to report the cases becomes a critical piece of the solution to reducing the successful attacks on schools.

The advantages to active bystanding training are numerous. First, it has the benefit of allowing individuals to become more engaged in a proactive rather than reactive stance. This approach can be used to engage potential attackers before they arrive at the schoolhouse door. Thus, reducing the pressure on schools to provide “last ditch effort” prevention strategies of physical barriers and resource officers among others - that have proven themselves to be far from absolute. Making the reporting of disturbing behaviors the norm, potentially can lead to more positive outcomes.

A second benefit is that active bystanding training can be customized to be taught to all age groups, with less traumatic impact on students. This occurs by making sure that students understand that active bystanding is about providing help to students rather than preventing a tragedy. It allows individuals to focus on their positive roles rather than the anxiety that is associated with “real life” active shooter drills.

The focus on the stories that result from these tragedies is something that will continue. America’s desire to focus on the fantastic and macabre is well documented. The news outlets and social media platforms will continue to promote and tell the stories to generate interest, followership, and to promote their agendas.

However, this same system can be applied to developing training tools that can be used to help identify fact verses fiction. Training such as active bystander, can be offered without “awfulizing” (Dryden, 2007) the horrors of mass shooting events and focus on solutions rather than using fear as a motivation. Thus, shifting toward a more positive prevention type outlook.

Unfortunately, because there exists the need to maintain a low threshold for reporting (perceive something, report something) given the current issues with cultivation, there is no easy answer to lowering the number of false positive reports.

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