

TERRORISM/VIOLENCE in the SCHOOLS

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By:

Daniel E. Della-Giustina, Ph.D.

Professor

West Virginia University

Safety and Environmental Management

College of Engineering and Mineral Resources

Morgantown, West Virginia

Scott E. Kerr, M.S.

Graduate Research Assistant

Dawn L. Georgevich, M.S.

Graduate Research Assistant

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Abstract

Acts of terrorism and violence have become more commonplace over the last few years in U.S. schools. Researchers at West Virginia University developed a survey, sampling schools in three West Virginia counties to determine if these schools have policies, plans, and procedures in place to deal with acts of terrorism/violence. The survey contained twenty-five questions posed to school administration, faculty, and staff as to their knowledge of plans, procedures and responsibilities for preventing and responding to a terrorist/violent event. Eight of the original twenty-five questions were chosen to determine the preparedness of schools in the event of violent or terrorist acts. The data were then analyzed to determine if faculty, staff, and administration possessed the knowledge and the skills to successfully implement preparedness and response plans.

Introduction

Acts of terrorism and violence have become more commonplace over the last several years in United States schools. Ten years ago when Dr. Della-Giustina first put together his text on Planning for School Emergencies, terrorist acts were mentioned but, very little was said regarding planning and preparing for a terrorist act. Now a decade later, terrorism and violence has become an important issue in our schools across the nation.

Researchers at West Virginia University developed a survey to determine if schools have policies, plans, and procedures in place to deal with acts of terrorism/violence. A review of literature relevant to this study at hand was to identify acts of terrorism/violence in schools in the United States. However, the search summarized the limited field of information pertaining to this study. The survey contained twenty-five questions posed a sample from three counties in West Virginia. To do this a survey instrument was used in three high schools and three junior/middle schools in West Virginia. This survey to school administration, faculty, and staff was designed to document their knowledge of plans, procedures and responsibilities for preventing with and responding to a terrorist/violent event. The original survey instrument contained 25 yes/no questions to determine the preparedness of schools in the event of acts of terrorism/violence. Eight of the original twenty-five questions were chosen to determine the preparedness of schools in the event of violent or terrorist acts. These data were then analyzed to determine if faculty, staff, and administration possessed the knowledge and the skills to successfully implement preparedness and response plans.

Recent Shootings Involving U.S. Schools

The tragedy of terrorism and violence at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, again brought the issue of school terrorism/violence into the limelight. Following these acts, schools are frantically searching for answers to deal with these outbreaks of violence. Unfortunately, answers are difficult to develop and not uniformly accepted or uniformly effective. Most people agree that these issues need to be explored and the answers weighed carefully. Communities need to be better prepared to face these acts of terrorism and violence should they occur in their own backyard.

Strategies suggested, in this article, are based on survey data as to what protective measures should be developed for preventing and responding to school terrorism and violence. This data may offer valuable answers to schools across the nation in the fight against school terrorism and violence. There does not exist a panacea to this problem. Each individual school system needs to develop its own guidelines and formulate these guidelines into a comprehensive plan that will serve the distinctive needs of that school.

Recent Shootings involving U.S. Schools:

From The Associated Press

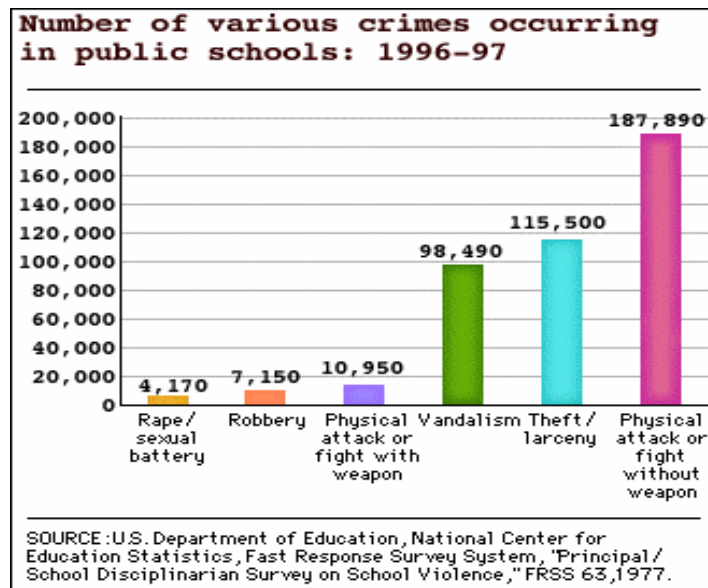
- April 16, 1999 - A high school sophomore fired two shotgun blasts in a school hallway in Notus, Idaho. No one injured.
- May 21, 1998 - Two teen-agers are fatally shot and more than 20 people are hurt when a 15-year-old boy allegedly opens fire at a high school in Springfield, Ore. His parents are found slain at their home. He is awaiting trial.
- May 19, 1998 - Three days before his graduation, an 18-year old honor student allegedly opens fire in a parking lot at the high school in Fayetteville, Tenn., killing a classmate who was dating his ex-girlfriend. He is awaiting trial.
- April 24, 1998 - A science teacher is shot to death in front of students eighth grade graduation dance in Edinboro, Pa. A 14-year-old student awaits trial.
- March 24, 1998 - Four girls and a teacher are shot to death and 10 people wounded during a false fire alarm at a middle school in Jonesboro, Ark., when two boys 11 and 13, open fire from the woods. Both are convicted in juvenile court and can be held to the age of 21.
- Dec. 1, 1997 - Three students are killed and five others wounded in a hallway at Heath High school in West Paducah, Ky. A 14-year old student is arrested. One of the wounded girls is paralyzed.
- Oct. 1, 1997 - A 16 year old boy in Pearl, Miss., is accused of killing his mother, then going to his high school and shooting nine students, two fatally. He is sentenced to life in prison. Two others await trial on accessory charges.

National Data

National data, collected from the Department of Education on school violence/terrorism, show that 10 percent of the nation's schools have experienced one or more serious or violent crimes during the school year of 1996-7(1). For rural schools the figure was lower, 8%(1).

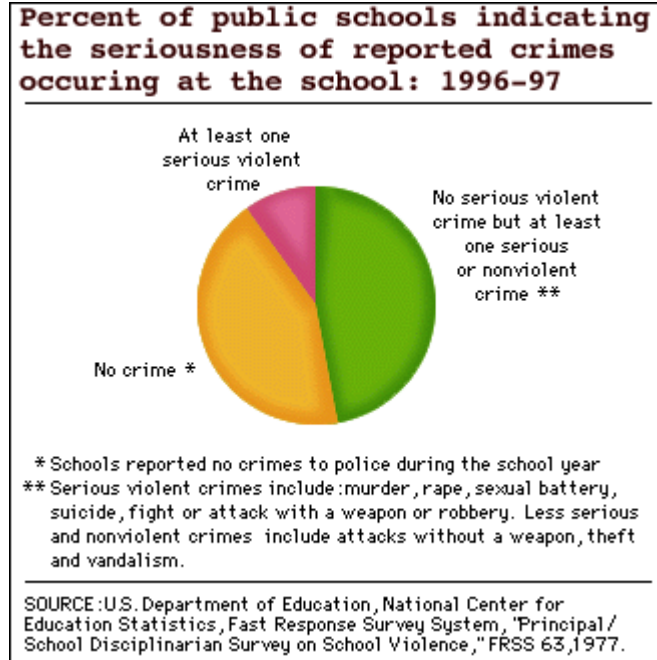
Two graphs follow that illustrate the types and occurrences of crimes committed in public schools. The first graph (Figure 1) shows the number of various crimes occurring in public schools in 1996-1997. The second graph (Figure 2) shows the percent of public schools experiencing crimes of different levels of seriousness, 1996-1997.

Figure 1



(Y-axis indicates the number of students)

Figure 2

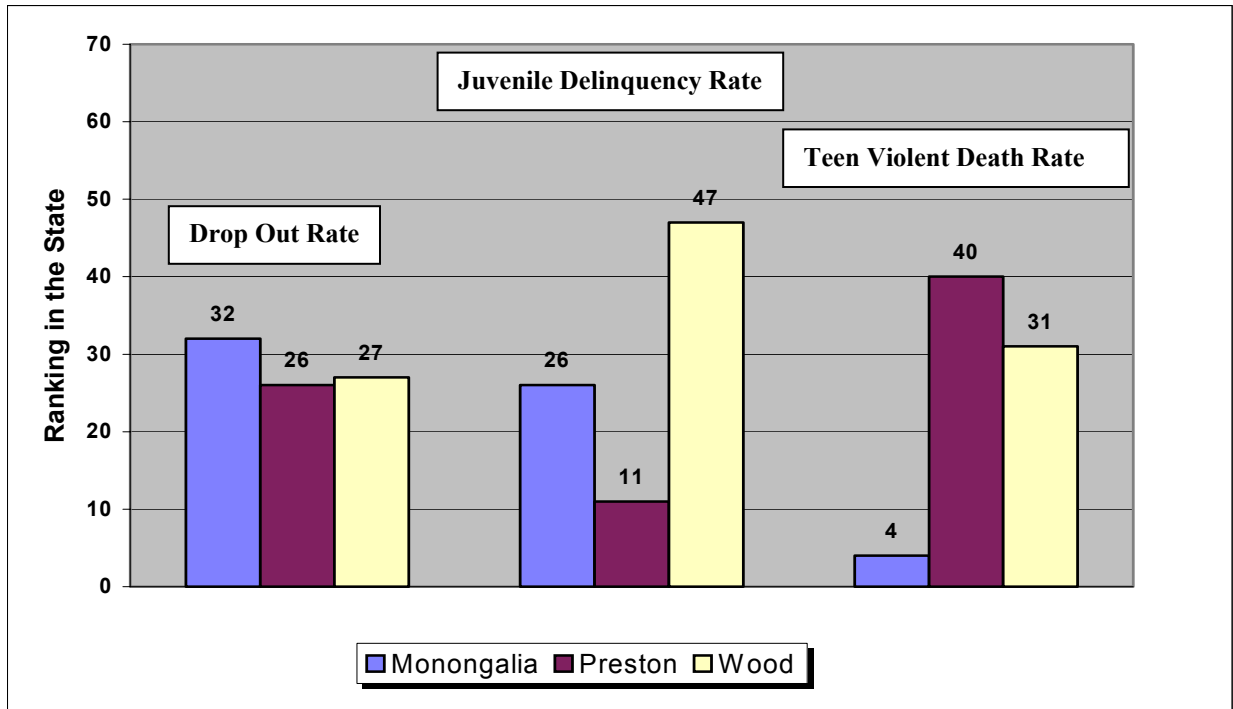


Survey Background

The survey was conducted across three of the fifty-five West Virginia Counties: Monongalia, Preston, and Wood Counties. Monongalia County (Morgantown High School, Suncrest Middle School) is located in the northeastern part of the state. The following data were taken from the West Virginia Kids Count Statistics, with county rank based on the most recent available data: 1=best and 55= the worst (2). The high school dropout rate is based on the percentage of enrolled 12th grade students who graduate from high school (2). The juvenile delinquency case rate is determined by the number of delinquency cases reported per 1,000 youths ages 10-21, including status offenses, misdemeanors, and felonies (2). The teen violent death rate is determined by the number of deaths from homicides, suicides, and unintentional injuries to teens ages 15-19 years per 100,000 teens (2).

According to the 1994 Kids Count Statistics (2) in West Virginia (Figure 3) shows the rate of high school dropouts, juvenile delinquency rates teen violent death rates in each of the high schools and the middle schools in their respective counties. These statistics provide a profile of students who may commit violent acts or acts of terrorism in the schools.

Figure 3



The original survey instrument contained 25 yes/no questions to determine the preparedness of schools in the event of acts of violence or terrorism. Eight of the original twenty-five questions were chosen to profile the preparedness of our sample of six schools in the event of violent or terrorist acts. These questions follow below in Figure 4.

Figure 4

- Survey Questions**
1. Does your school emergency response plan include provisions for acts of terrorism? Terrorist acts could be carrying weapons in the school, bomb threats, kidnapping, taking hostages, or other threats of violence.
 2. Are all administrators trained on emergency procedures and what to do in the event of a terrorist act?
 3. Are students informed of their role in the event of an emergency situation?
 4. Are all staff members informed of their role in an emergency situation?
 5. Are teachers trained to observe students to watch for signs of a terrorist act?
 6. Does your school conduct drills or exercises to prepare for terrorist related acts?
 7. Does your school have coded alarms to warn of emergencies?
 8. Does your school plan to implement a plan that deals with terrorism?

Figure 5

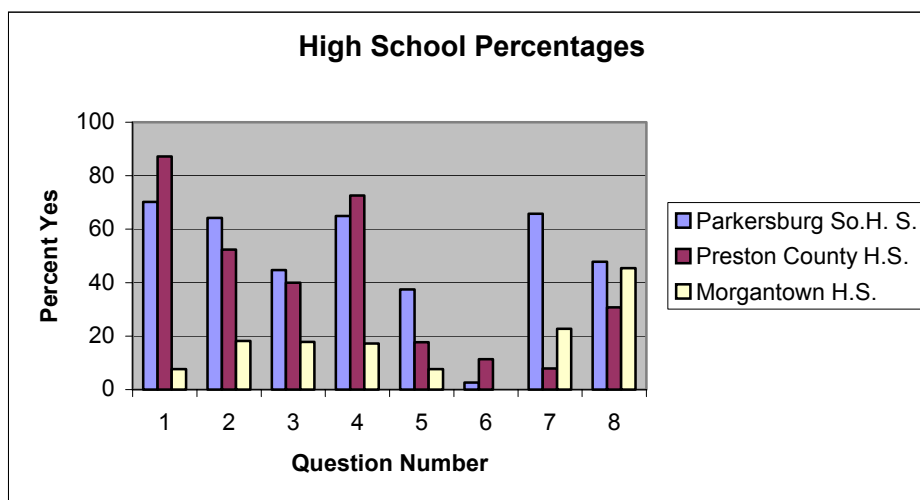


Figure 5 identifies areas of improvement for participating high schools. The results show that the schools had some written plan to deal with different types of emergencies, but not specifically for the acts of terrorism or violence. Furthermore, the data suggest that teachers are not trained to observe students and identify potential warning signs of possible terrorist or violent acts. The data also suggest that schools are not conducting drills or exercises to prepare and respond to terrorist acts.

Figure 6

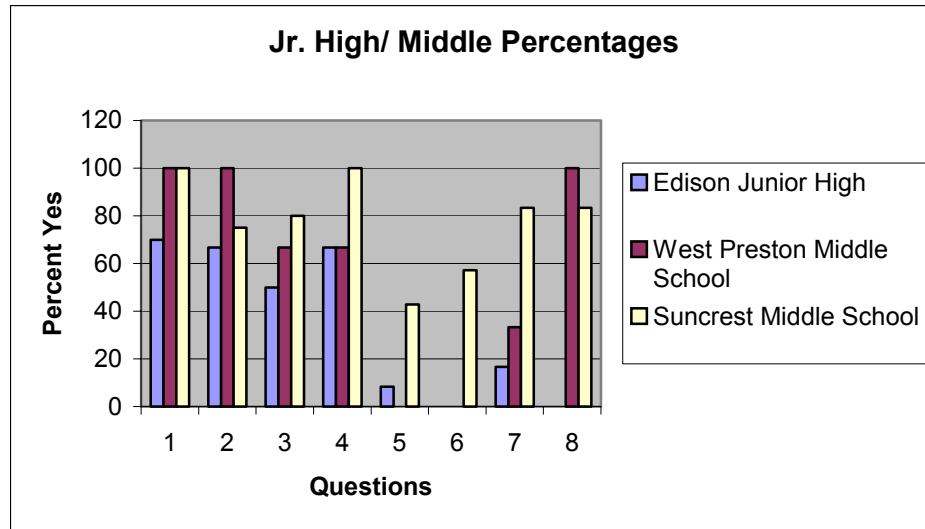


Figure 6 identifies areas of improvement for participating middle/junior high schools.

The results suggest that the schools have some written plan to deal with different types of emergencies, including acts of terrorism or violence. Similar to Figure 5, teachers are not trained to observe students and identify potential warning signs of possible terrorist or violent acts. Again, schools are not conducting drills or exercises to prepare and respond to terrorist acts. Middle and junior high schools do not have coded alarms to warn of emergencies in the schools.

The following box contains several comments made by schools to the survey.

Comments Received on the Survey

- We are in the dark as to what to do in the event of a Terrorist Act.
- This school is wide open to acts of terrorism. We have an open campus where almost every room can be accessed for periods of time during the day. If it were the intention of any person to cause harm or damage to persons or property they would have a clear advantage.
- We have a procedure to follow in case of a bomb threat, but to my knowledge that is all.
- All personnel need to be advised and trained on emergencies.
- I don't think our school has anything on terrorism.
- School Counselors should do more intervention and less scheduling and other "program paperwork".

Recommendations

Based on our sample survey completed in the state of West Virginia, one can infer the problems that our nation's schools are facing. These are not the only answers to the problem but reflect our judgement as to some improvements that could be made. These recommendations may not work for all schools. It is recommended that each school evaluate these for their effectiveness in creating and implementing that school's violence/terrorism plans.

Each school is encouraged to develop a student organization, with a name like Students Opposed to School Violence (SOS-V). This student organization would operate similarly to Students Against Drunk Drivers (SADD). The club would be a student run organization with a faculty advisor that will support and mentor the organization. This mentor may be a school counselor. The goal of this organization is to gain knowledge of what is known about school violence and methods of prevention, including signs to look for in potential problem individuals. The SOS-V will act as a monitoring group, on the lookout for problems to be reported to appropriate administrators, in the hope that these officials can resolve a problem before it starts.

With student members rotating every semester, we envision this method will exert some peer pressure on students not to commit these acts of terrorism and violence.

Another approach is to have a standardized complaint form to encourage students to submit sensitive information anonymously to the principal regarding potential threats to school safety. This approach will have its pros and cons. Although anonymity has its place in revealing potential threats, the implementation of this approach must be made carefully so that no one can abuse its power.

All schools should have current scale diagrams of their floors and submit these to the local first responder authorities (Police, Fire Department, Etc.). This will inform these authorities of the layout of the school in the case of an emergency. Not only should these diagrams indicate usual entry, egress points, and traffic use patterns, but also potential locations where students and faculty may be trapped and the location of hazardous materials that might amplify a crisis. Drills should be conducted and critiqued annually to prepare administration, faculty, staff, students, and responding agencies in the event of a terrorist /violent event.

We recommend that twice a year, an assembly with teachers, staff, and students should meet to discuss conflict resolution and identification of violent threats and other violent behavior at the school. These assemblies could give students much needed information on how to resolve conflicts among them. The student should also have some knowledge of how to identify violent thinking and behavior. Such identification consists of basic information on how to identify students apparently having difficulties, who may pose a threat to school safety. It is strongly recommend that a school psychologist or a competent professional evaluate the mental health of the referred students. Some warning signs to look for are contained in the figure on “Potential Warning Signs for Violence in Children” (Figure 7).

Figure 7: Potential Warning Signs For Violence in Children

Warning signs in the Toddler and Preschool child:

- Has many temper tantrums in a single day or several lasting more than 15 minutes, and often cannot be calmed by parents, family members, or other caregivers;
- Has many aggressive outburst, often for no reason;
- Is extremely active, impulsive, and fearless;
- Consistently refuses to follow directions and listen to adults;
- Does not seem attached to parents; for example, does not touch, look for, or return to parents in strange places;
- Frequently watches violence on television, engaged in play that has violent themes, or is cruel toward other children.

Warning signs in the school age child:

- Has trouble paying attention and concentrating;
- Often disrupts classroom activities;
- Does poorly in school;
- Frequently gets into fights with other children in school;
- Reacts to disappointments, criticism, or teasing with extreme and intense anger, blame, or revenge;
- Watches many violent television shows and movies or plays a lot of violent video games;
- Has few friends with other children known to be unruly or aggressive;
- Consistently does not listen to adults;
- Is not sensitive to the feelings of others;
- Is cruel or violent toward pets or other animals;
- Is easily frustrated.
-

Warning signs in the Preteen or Teenage Adolescent:

- Consistently does not listen to authority figures;
- Pays no attention to the feelings or rights of others;
- Mistreats people and seems to rely on physical violence or threats of violence to solve problems;
- Often expresses the feeling that life has treated him or her unfairly;
- Does poorly in school and skips class;
- Misses school frequently for no identifiable reason;
- Gets suspended from or drops out of school;
- Joins a gang, gets involved in fighting, stealing, or destroying property;
- Drinks alcohol and/or uses drugs.

Source: American Psychological Association and the American Academy of Pediatrics.

As a result of this survey of three West Virginia school districts, a follow-up project is planned to extend violence preparedness and response across all 55 county school districts in West Virginia. This project could serve as a national model.

Security Issues

Magnetic metal detectors are being used more widely in school systems today than years ago. They discourage students from carrying in metallic weapons such as knives, guns, and

metal components of bombs. Alone, this type of intervention is not sufficient since some weapons and bombs do not contain metal and can still be smuggled into the school. Simply put, “The debate America had ... over whether metal detectors are effective is virtually irrelevant: expect them in a school near you, starting this September”(3).

A closed campus with one main entrance into the school can be a helpful protective strategy, even if the school is composed of several separate buildings, as long as they are located close together. A guard and devices such as a magnetic metal detection system can be stationed to monitor any entering the school. The closed campus idea may require the erecting of an impenetrable fence around the entire school complex, in order to restrict entrance to only one point. All visitors to the school should be required to sign in, and show photo identification at the entrance, as well as sign back out as they leave. This should also be required for persons making deliveries. Guards or students during a study period may be placed at other exits of the school to direct all visitors to the main entrance of the school to sign in, especially if the school is not an enclosed campus. Other entrances or exits should be restricted to emergency use.

Schools should seek security expertise to enhance current security systems. Surveillance Cameras could be placed throughout the school to monitor areas such as entrances, exits, and hallways. These cameras should operate continuously with the resulting videotapes being analyzed then archived at a secure site.

Effective control of the distribution of building keys is very important. Non-duplicable keys should be issued or available to a small, tightly controlled group of responsible adult employees only. Each individual should be held accountable for the keys issued to them.

Summary Elements

- Identify the basic warning signs of potential violence in the schools. This can help stop problems before they turn into disruptive events.
- Define strategies and initiatives for dealing with anticipated problems that have the potential to occur in schools. This includes staying current with national and worldwide school terrorism issues and planning as well as evaluating these plans for effectiveness as they are implemented.
- Develop strategies to mitigate the impact of youth violence and terrorism, when it does occur. If the problems can be curtailed at a younger age, then the age range of recent juvenile perpetrators, acts of terrorism and violence down the road can be reduced, even prevented.

Conclusion

This study has shown that schools lack effective policies, plans, and procedures to respond to acts of terrorism/violence. There is no universally applicable formula for prevention. Preventative measures that might be effective for one school might not work for another school. Individual schools need to evaluate their plans in order to choose what will work best for them. As a result of this survey of three West Virginia school districts, a follow-up project is planned to extend violence preparedness and response across all 55 county school districts in West Virginia. This project could serve as a national model.

References

- (1) U.S. Department of Education, National Council for Education Statistics, Fast Response Survey System: "Principal /School Disciplinarian Survey on School Violence". FRSS63,1977.
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- (5) Johnson, Kendall.(1993) School Crisis Management.
- (6) American Psychological Association and American Academy of Pediatrics, "Potential Warning Signs for Violence in Children" (1998).