

## Chapter 19

# Averted School Shootings

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### 19.1 Averted School Shootings

As the need for this volume demonstrates, school violence is a worldwide problem. Initially thought to be a problem only for the United States of America (due to the widespread lethal school rampages of the mid- to late 1990s), this myth has since been dispelled by similar incidents on all continents (Ohsako, 1997). There were 655 violent deaths at U.S. schools between 1992 and 2010 ( $M=36.4$  per year), a figure that includes school shootings, suicides, and other forms of violence (see Table 19.1). Although school shootings are a relatively rare phenomenon (Dinkes, Cataldi, & Lin-Kelly, 2007), accounting for about 30 deaths in the last 30 years in the United States (Newman, Fox, Harding, Mehta, & Roth, 2004), when such rampages do occur, they are heavily reported by the media because of the vulnerability of children and the horror of the events.

After the incident at Columbine High School, the public, the authorities, and school officials demanded to know who could do such a thing and what could have stopped it. As a result of Columbine, a number of security changes have been put in place including greater police presence (in the form of school resource officers), staff hallway monitoring, video surveillance, identification badges, locked doors, and more metal detectors. Administration policies have changed also, with adoption of antibullying initiatives, zero tolerance policies, and, in some states, required reporting of suspicious behavior/mental illness. In addition, researchers started to focus on understanding the people who committed these crimes as well as the environment in which they were committed.

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**Table 19.1** School-associated violent deaths of students, staff, and nonstudents, 1992–2010

Year	Homicides
1992–1993	47
1993–1994	38
1994–1995	39
1995–1996	46
1996–1997	45
1997–1998	47
1998–1999	38
1999–2000	26
2000–2001	26
2001–2002	27
2002–2003	25
2003–2004	37
2004–2005	40
2005–2006	37
2006–2007	48
2007–2008	38
2008–2009	26
2009–2010	25
<i>Total</i>	<i>655</i>

Compiled by U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Bureau of Justice Statistics (2011)

## 19.2 Overview of Lethal School Violence

It is important to note that several different terms have been used in the literature to describe the school shooting phenomenon. According to Daniels and Bradley (2011, p. 3), lethal school violence involves one or more fatalities that happen “in school, on school property, at school sponsored activities, or to a member of the school community on his or her commute to or from school.” Lethal school violence may include suicide, domestic murder/suicide of a member of the school community while at school, gang-related deaths, barricaded captive situations, and rampage school shootings (Daniels & Bradley). One form of lethal school violence has been termed the *rampage school shooting* or simply a *school shooting*. According to Newman et al. (2004), “Rampage shootings are defined by the fact that they involve attacks on multiple parties, selected almost at random” (pp. 14–15). This type of school violence is most similar to the particular type of mass murder known as “civilian massacre” defined by Cantor, Mullen, and Alpers (2000) in their review of seven cases from Australia, New Zealand, and Britain. These individuals engaged in the indiscriminate killing of mostly random victims. Cantor et al. found that all seven of these male perpetrators were socially unsuccessful, self-absorbed, and resentful. They also tended to

be egocentric, rigid, obsessional, and narcissistic, as well as being obsessed with guns and having a "lone wolf" mentality. However, it is important to note that all mass murderers, spree killers, and school shooters fit this profile.

### ***19.2.1 Prevalence of School Shootings***

School shootings are statistically rare, accounting for less than 1% of adolescent homicides per year. Indeed, in 1999, the year of the Columbine shooting, less than 0.1% of youth deaths occurred in school shootings in the U.S. (Cornell, 2006). Despite these data, when a school shooting does happen, it has an immediate national impact. Table 19.1 presents the numbers of students, nonstudents, and teachers killed in primary and secondary school-associated homicides in the United States from 1992 to 2010 (U.S. Department of Education, U.S. Department of Justice Office of Justice Programs, 2011).

### ***19.2.2 Effects of School Shootings***

The aftereffects of a school shooting are widespread and long-lasting. In some way, everyone in a community is impacted by such an event. On a micro level, every member of a school is affected by a shooting. Daniels and Page (2012) describe the impact on direct and indirect victims of school captive-taking events. Direct victims are those immediately "in the line of fire": those in the building who are threatened or injured during the melee. Indirect victims are those not in the immediate vicinity of the shooting, friends and relatives of the victims, and others in the community who are negatively impacted.

The psychological effects of a rampage school shooting have been well documented (Ardis, 2004; Fox, Roth, & Newman, 2003; Larkin, 2007; Nims, 2000; Sullivan & Guerette, 2003). Fear and anxiety are commonly reported, both in the immediacy of the event, and longer term, among direct and indirect victims alike. In addition, many people experience depression, social withdrawal, and even family problems in the aftermath of a school shooting (Daniels & Bradley, 2011). In the short term, many will experience acute stress disorder (ASD), and over time, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) may develop.

The psychological trauma caused by a school shooting also has behavioral consequences. For some students, there is a decrease in attendance for weeks or even months. Academic performance may also be negatively impacted by a school shooting. This may be linked to decreases in attendance, but is likely due to the students' struggles with fears and anxieties.

On a larger scale, Eric Harris, one of the shooters at Columbine High School, achieved his desired level of infamy; sadly, he also achieved, in a way he had not anticipated, his desired goal for a worldwide revolution. How so? His actions, along with those of his

accomplice Dylan Klebold, changed how we think about and establish school security worldwide. They, among others, were responsible for the need of such a volume as this, and for people to dedicate their careers to making schools safer.

### 19.3 Research Review

#### 19.3.1 *Mass Murder and Profiling*

As we think about classifying the type of crime rampage school shootings represent, we first turn our attention to other, similar events. The Federal Bureau of Investigation's definition of mass murder is: "a number of murders (four or more) occurring during the same incident, with no distinctive time period between the murders" (2012, p. 8). Thus, some of the more deadly school rampages may be classified as mass murder. For years, researchers have studied the psychological characteristics of mass murderers using both deductive and inductive profiling. Some investigators have tried to apply the same techniques to school shooters.

Deductive profiling avoids generalizations and focuses on a specific incident. This method dissects the offender's actions before, during, and after the crime (Turvey, 1998), all in an attempt to discover what might have led to the event in question and how the offender reacted during and after the crime. Hopefully, a clear picture of the mind in motion emerges. The disadvantage of this method, however, is that it is event specific by design. While the findings add to the knowledge base, deductive profiling does not seek to predict and, because of this lack of generalizability, is useful only after a crime has been committed.

In contrast, inductive profiling looks at a crime as one action among many similar actions. It assumes that when an offender commits a particular crime, his or her motives, characteristics, and traits will be similar to those of others who commit similar crimes (Turvey, 2008). Inductive profiling seeks to identify these general motivations, characteristics, and traits. The great benefit of this method is that it can be used to predict who might be likely to commit such a crime. The disadvantage of inductive profiling is that because it seeks to generalize, it can lead to the mislabeling of non-criminal-minded individuals (Mulvey & Cauffman, 2001).

Overall, neither deductive nor inductive methods have yielded a valid profile of "the school shooter." However, some progress has been made on another front. Holmes and Holmes (1992) suggested that mass murder should be classified along six dimensions: motivation, anticipated gain, victim selection, victim relationship, traits, and spatial mobility. Since many of the high-profile school rampages may be classified as mass murder, the perpetrators could perhaps be similarly classified. At this time, no such research has been conducted to validate this typology among rampage school shooters. However, this classification system is fairly consistent with recent research on the historical, dispositional, and clinical traits encountered in violence risk assessment.

### 19.3.2 Juvenile Risk Assessment

Verlinden, Hersen, and Thomas (2000) looked at juvenile violence and juvenile risk assessment with respect to nine adolescent mass murder cases, focusing primarily on five domains: individual factors, family factors, school and peer factors, situational and attack-related factors, and societal and environmental factors. However, as stated previously we must not expect these characteristics to offer an actionable profile of a potential school shooter; instead they should be used to better understand people who have committed such a crime and look for common traits that are prevalent.

*Individual factors.* The individual factors found in adolescents who commit mass murder include uncontrollable rage, blaming others, depression, threatening others, and developing a detailed plan (Verlinden et al., 2000). Eric Harris, one of the perpetrators of the Columbine rampage, exhibited yet another individual factor not mentioned by Verlinden et al.: feelings of superiority. He believed he had a right to kill people who were inferior to him (Cullen, 2009), writing in his journal, "I feel like GOD and I wish I was, having everyone being OFFICIALLY lower than me" (4/12/98) and, "but before I leave this worthless place, I will kill whoever I deem unfit for anything at all. especially life" (4/21/98).

*Family factors.* The family factors linked to adolescent mass murderers included a lack of parental supervision and troubled family relationships, usually revolving around divorce or separation (Verlinden et al., 2000). Dysfunctional families are not uncommon for people who commit crimes, and a lack of supervision combined with a lack of support can result in individuals acting out violently. However, since many school shooters (such as Eric Harris and Thurston High School shooter Kip Kinkel) were reportedly from functional two-parent homes, familial dysfunction may contribute to instances of aggression but is not a necessary factor in fueling future violence.

*School and peer factors.* The school and peer factors defined by Verlinden et al. (2000) included school isolation and rejection by peers as well as the identification with an outcast group. O'Toole (2000) also found that a tolerance for disrespectful behavior was a common theme among schools in which a rampage shooting occurred.

*Situational and attack factors.* Situational and attack-related factors (which are the most important with respect to the act itself) were indicative of a decline in functioning (such as poor school attendance or grades) and a recent loss, stress, or humiliation. Additionally, making threats and discussing plans tended to be a common practice for these perpetrators (Vossekuil, Reddy, Fein, Borum, & Modzeleski, 2000); these acts were planned rather than impulsive. The often-heard impulsivity myth may have arisen because many of these individuals experienced a "stressor" or a traumatic event—break-up of an intimate relationship, divorce in the family, loss of a loved one—that closely preceded their attack (Cornell, 2006). Although they had ideations long before the stressor, this event may have been a catalyst helping to propel them into action.

*Societal and environmental factors.* Societal and environmental factors can be important contributors to school shootings. Bullying, for example, has long been asso-

ciated with violence as well as with emotional problems (Nansel et al., 2001; Olweus, 1992). And with the ubiquitous presence of internet sites, text messaging, and other nondirect means of communication, there are more opportunities to bully and be bullied; no longer can adolescents avoid bullying by avoiding direct encounters.

Underscoring the important role that bullying can play, Vossekuil, Fein, Reddy, Borum, and Modzeleski (2002) found that 75% of school offenders reported feeling persecuted, bullied, or threatened by others. Several attackers claimed to have been bullied, even tormented, for quite some time and cited bullying as a significant factor in their decision to kill. Other studies have shown that those who ultimately went on a rampage were bullies themselves (Larkin, 2007). As an example, Eric Harris claimed that he was the victim of bullying, although the extent to which his experiences were significantly different than most students in his school remains a question (Cullen, 2009; Larkin, 2007). Indeed, there is some evidence that he also engaged in bullying. In his journal he wrote (Shepard n.d.):

Everyone is always making fun of me because of how I look, and how [...] weak I am [...]. Well, I will get you all back: ultimate [...] revenge here. You people could have shown more respect, treated me better, asked for my knowledge or guidance more, treated me more like senior, and maybe I wouldn't have been as ready to tear your [...] heads off... That's where a lot of my hate grows from (11/12/1998).

Bullying may not be the primary reason why a person commits such a crime, but it should be regarded as a very important contributing factor (Daniels, 2011).

To further add support to these individual factors, Meloy, Hempel, Mohandie, Shiva, and Gray (2001) studied 34 adolescents who had committed 27 mass murders (some incidents were committed by more than one person), many on school grounds, between 1958 and 1999. They found that the majority were loners and some abused alcohol and drugs. Half of the offenders had been bullied by others and had a history of violence. One quarter had a psychiatric history, but only two were actually psychotic at the time of the crime. Depression and antisocial behavior were very common, and there was usually a precipitating event prior to the act itself, such as a loss of love or failure at school. Most of these offenders made threats to a third party, but only half of them threatened the actual targets.

McGee and DeBernardo (1999) pursued a different approach in studying adolescent mass murderers, using deductive criminal profiling on 14 cases involving young killers to construct a profile of what they called the "classroom avenger." As was found in the juvenile risk assessments discussed earlier, the classroom avengers in these cases reported that they had been rejected, humiliated, or bullied by classmates or peers. These findings need to be replicated.

*Demographic and dispositional factors.* McGee and DeBernardo (1999) identified several key factors that are important in defining the typical classroom avenger. The first is demographics and disposition. They found that, in general, a classroom avenger was a physically healthy, blue collar or middle class Caucasian male around 16 years old. He more than likely lived in a rural community with a population of less than 50,000. The family situation was usually dysfunctional, with divorce and friction between the parents being common. Presumably because of this, the parents were at risk of being the avenger's first victims. The child, and often the family too, showed a prevailing sense of

hidden anger; the child's anger was sometimes directed toward the parents with whom there was usually a power struggle. If the child was disciplined, the punishment was overly harsh. All 14 of the children studied were familiar with guns and had a keen interest in them (McGee & DeBernardo).

*Historical factors.* There were no signs of severe physical handicap in any of these 14 individuals, although certain developmental milestones (such as crawling) could have been delayed (McGee & DeBernardo, 1999). Their IQ was in the average to above-average range, with no evidence of brain disorders or severe mental retardation. There was usually an early history of inadequate bonding and social problems; as a result, these children were usually described as "unaffectionate." They tended to be introverted loners with few close friends. The friends they did have could be described as "outsiders." They were intolerant of others and were usually bored by the typical pastimes that children their age find interesting, such as clubs and sports (McGee & DeBernardo).

Signs of psychotic mental disorders and hallucinations were absent among the classroom avengers studied by McGee and DeBernardo (1999). As mentioned earlier, their cognitive style was rigid and inflexible, and their mood was usually depressed, although this would often be hard for other people to notice as an indicator because these so-called classroom avengers often show no signs of being troubled. Obvious signs (like insomnia, weight loss, and crying spells) may have been replaced with manifested anger and resentment towards parents or peers. These individuals usually exhibited the acting-out symptoms of depression, such as temper outbursts, violence, vandalism, insulting others, and excessive risk taking. While not showing overt signs of psychotic paranoia, they were often overly sensitive to criticism and rejection and were often viewed by their peers as inept and "weird." They projected their faults and failures onto others, which increased their anger.

Although vengeance was the primary motive for these adolescents, achieving notoriety was also important. They fantasized about killing and often mentioned it to the few friends they had. Some of these killers drew up a hit list that included those who had teased them (McGee & DeBernardo, 1999), while others had so much hatred for society in general that they chose any target that was available.

The murders they committed were planned and included creative elements. For example, during the Jonesboro, Arkansas shooting, 13-year-old Mitchell Johnson and 11-year-old Andrew Golden pulled their school's fire alarm and shot at students and teachers as they exited the building, killing five and injuring ten. Such elements showed a higher level of sophistication than an apparent "outburst" of rage. McGee and DeBernardo (1999) believe that the prototype, if you will, of a classroom avenger consists of an Axis I psychiatric disorder of atypical depression and an Axis II disorder of mixed personality disorder with paranoid, antisocial, and narcissistic features.

*Contextual features of the classroom.* The last issue that McGee and DeBernardo (1999) assessed was the classroom avenger's contextual factors. In general, they found these particular killers to be overly influenced by outside sources such as books, videos, or material about previous similar crimes. Usually they kept a journal or internet blog where they stated their intentions prior to the act. The attack itself was usually directly preceded by a warning such as "tomorrow is the big day." When taken in context with



the other descriptors described earlier, these threats should have not been taken lightly. The perpetrator was likely to have been exposed to multiple psychosocial stressors such as the loss of a girlfriend or a bullying incident within the 2 weeks prior to the incident.

### **19.3.3 The School Climate**

Investigations into school shootings have found similarities in the school climate among schools that suffered a shooting. For example, it appears that the whole school environment, including the administration, teachers, and students, was generally in denial that students could pose a serious threat of violent behavior toward the school community (Daniels et al., 2010; O'Toole, 2000). Numerous red flags were ignored, violent tendencies and threats went unreported, and little was done to discourage bullying and victimization.

Reacting to a perceived permissive environment in the aftermath of violence, many schools adopted zero tolerance policies, with overall results being ineffective (American Psychological Association, 2008). Heightened security measures such as video surveillance, metal detectors, and ID badges have yielded mixed results. In contrast, antibullying policies seem to have been more effective (Daniels & Bradley, 2011), as has the presence of skilled school resource officers (Johnson, 1999; May, Fessel, & Means, 2004).

## **19.4 Averted School Shootings**

We begin this section with a bit of a conundrum. Conducting research on events that were averted is conducting research on nonevents. We are attempting to study something that *might* have happened, but did not. Therefore, (with rare exceptions) we can never be certain that the event would have in fact taken place. Hence, interpretation of findings of such nonevents becomes challenging. With that being said, my (JD) students and I have been studying averted school shootings and believe that we can carefully choose which averted shootings to study using the sampling strategy of selective sampling in qualitative research. Specifically, we chose incidents in which there was sufficient evidence that a shooting was imminent to bring a conviction. Incidents without this level of evidence were not included in our qualitative study (Daniels et al., 2010).

### **19.4.1 Content Analysis of new Reports**

As we began our studies of averted school shootings in 2004, our first task was to develop a database of such events. The database included news articles about averted school shootings in the United States from October 2001 through October 2004.



From the database we later selected participants for a qualitative study in which we conducted on-site interviews of school personnel and police officers who were involved with discovering and thwarting the plots (Daniels et al., 2010). Internet searches of the *Lexis/Nexis Academic* database of news sources from the U.S. and around the world revealed 30 averted shooting plots for the time period. We (Daniels et al., 2007) then conducted a content analysis of these news articles, specifically searching for information about:

- Plot details
- How the plot was discovered
- Steps taken by the school once the plot was discovered
- Steps taken by the police once the plot was discovered
- The final legal outcomes of the investigation (when available).

We found little difference between averted plots and the plots that were successfully carried out, as described in studies of school shootings (O'Toole, 2000; Vossekuil et al., 2002).

#### 19.4.1.1 Details of the Plots

Our results identify six main categories of plot: characteristics of the suspect, intended victims, communication and recruitment, planning, weapons, and motives.

*Characteristics of the suspect.* Supporting earlier results (McGee & DeBernardo, 1999; Vossekuil et al., 2002), Daniels et al. (2007) found that the vast majority of plotters were male, Caucasian, and of high school age.

*Intended victims.* Some of the plotters had drawn up a "hit list" or a specific plan to kill a specific type of student, such as athletes (Daniels et al., 2007). However, this was not always the case; one individual merely planned to kill as many people as possible.

*Communication and recruitment.* As O'Toole (2000) pointed out, school shooters are likely to have told people about their intentions. We (Daniels et al., 2007) found support for this finding and discovered that the majority of the plotters communicated their plans to others, typically through emails, Facebook, or face-to-face conversation. Often, these threats were not taken seriously (Swezey & Thorp, 2010), and the individuals hearing these comments tended not to take them seriously.

*Planning.* This aspect of the plot is the most diverse among the scenarios. Some of the shooters planned in great detail using maps and floor plans of the school, hit lists, and diversionary tactics. Others simply intended to go in shooting, killing indiscriminately. Other plans focused on detonating explosives in order to maximize casualties.

*Weapons.* In some plots the students had acquired weapons or were attempting to get them. These included knives, guns, bombs, and swords. Although more challenging to acquire, guns are the top choice of potential plotters. Bombs are easy to

make, with detailed instructions found by a simple internet search. The easiest weapons to obtain are knives and swords.

*Motives.* The most frequently cited motive was retaliation for being bullied (Daniels et al., 2007). Other motives included anger at a particular administrator or teacher, retaliation for being rejected, and, in one incident, retaliation after being caught in a cheating scandal.

#### 19.4.1.2 Discovering the Plot

The actual discovery of an impending tragedy was the one area of significant difference between cases of successful and averted school rampages. Again, six categories emerged: other students coming forward; alert administrators; police receiving a tip-off; police, parents, or teachers finding notes or intercepting emails; staff overhearing rumors; and specific threats being made. The vast majority of these plots were foiled because other students came forward, thus breaking the code of silence. Additionally, a number of cases were averted when the school and/or police received tips, often anonymous. These findings support those from other research showing that plotters discuss their plans and that the alertness of classmates and others, plus their willingness to come forward, is paramount.

#### 19.4.2 Qualitative Study

Using cases identified in the database described earlier, we then conducted a qualitative study of averted school shootings by interviewing school personnel and law enforcement officers directly involved in the events (Daniels et al., 2010). We interviewed 12 school employees and police officers/school resource officers at four U.S. schools at which a plotted school shooting had been discovered and thwarted. One audio recording was inaudible, so analyses included data from 11 participants. Through the use of Consensual Qualitative Research methodology (Hill, Thompson, & Williams, 1997), six primary domains emerged, with an additional "Other" for data that did not fit into any other domain. We now briefly describe each domain, including definitions and constituent elements. Note that because this was a qualitative study, there is no comparison group of either individuals involved in a shooting or individuals from schools at which there was no shooting or discovered plot.

*School conditions.* The most commonly described issue in averted school shootings is what we describe as school conditions. These are conditions that the school had employed "to ensure safety and promote optimal learning" before an incident occurred (Daniels et al., 2010, p. 76). Specific elements of school conditions included breaking the code of silence, preventive efforts, watchfulness/maintaining a physical presence, treating all students with dignity and respect, establishing meaningful relationships with all students, following established disciplinary procedures, and encouraging school-community collaboration.

*Intervention.* Interventions are, by definition, what people do after they become aware of a plot. Core activities included incident discovery, search and seizure, maintaining order in the school, de-escalation, notifying other school authorities, interviewing suspects, interactions with others in the community, and provision of mental health services.

*Crisis planning.* This concerns participants' "discussions about the need/importance of preparation" before a crisis occurs (Daniels et al., 2010, p. 76). Core elements included training and practice, adherence to policies and procedures, and the importance of school-community relationships.

*Interpersonal relationships.* This domain concerns efforts made by school staff to form trusting relationships with specific students. Issues such as establishing trust, preventing problems through rapport, treating students with respect and compassion, accentuating student strengths, and developing personal relationships with students are represented in this domain.

*Prevention efforts.* Participants' statements about efforts within the school to prevent violence, such as antibullying programs, we labeled prevention efforts. Specific core elements include adherence to established policies and procedures, following established (crisis) roles, training for crises, establishing or implementing programs (e.g., antibullying programs), crisis planning, and again, school-community collaboration.

*Problematic issues.* Problematic issues included anything that did not go well during the uncovering of the plot or in the immediate aftermath. Such issues as unanticipated events, discovery of systemic deficits, missed warning signs, or problems with the media were included in this domain.

The findings reveal some interesting parallels and contrasts with results of studies of schools at which a shooting occurred (Daniels & Bradley, 2011). The study of school shooters by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) found that many of the schools where a shooting took place demonstrated tolerance for disrespectful behavior (O'Toole, 2000). For example, some teachers may fail to confront students who are misbehaving, for a variety of reasons. They may fear for their own safety or fear the response of parents of disciplined students. In our work, we have found that schools that averted a shooting made efforts to curb disrespectful behavior, through establishment of *school conditions*, *interpersonal relationships*, and implementation of programs such as antibullying campaigns (*prevention efforts*).

Second, O'Toole (2000) found that schools commonly dispensed discipline inequitably prior to an attack. There tended to be a hierarchy of students, reinforced by the faculty and administration, who could do as they pleased without serious consequence, while others were seemingly micro-managed. The result is resentment and a tendency for increased misbehavior, or worse. In contrast, we found that administrators in schools that averted a shooting set the tone for consistency in discipline; that is, rules and expectations were articulated, as were the consequences for misbehavior, and those consequences were consistently and fairly meted out.

A third finding by the FBI was that some schools had developed an inflexible culture that became stagnant and unresponsive to changes in the larger culture of the community. A series of studies conducted for the National Academies found that

many rampage school shootings occurred in schools located in rapidly growing and changing communities, but that the schools were not reflecting those changes (National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2003). A variation of school-community collaboration emerged in four of the six primary domains described earlier from Daniels et al. (2010) (see Sect. 19.3.2). Specifically, schools that averted a shooting described efforts to cooperate with members of the larger community (*school conditions*) and interacted with members of the community, such as emergency responders, once a plot had been discovered (*intervention*). Moreover, development of active school-community relationships while developing a *crisis plan* was seen as critical. Finally, school-community collaboration was important when developing and implementing *prevention efforts*. Thus, we see the importance of schools becoming integrated with the larger community.

Finally, O'Toole (2000) found that in a large percentage of school shootings, at least one other person knew of the plot beforehand but did nothing to prevent it. This *code of silence* is an adolescent cultural norm; one does not want to be seen as a "snitch" (Morris, 2010). The code of silence may also be present because students did not take the threat seriously, instead believing the person issuing the threat was merely displaying bravado to gain respect. A third source of the code of silence is that even when some students took the threat seriously, they did not feel connected enough to anybody (adult) to report.

There are several things schools can do to break the code of silence. First, they can educate students about the difference between "snitching" and helping. The intent behind snitching is to get a person in trouble; reporting a threat or concern is intended to help the student or others. One school principal described having two all-school assemblies each year where he worked to change students' attitudes regarding snitching and helpfulness (Daniels et al., 2010). Second, schools that averted a shooting worked to develop a culture where everyone is treated with dignity and respect (Daniels et al.). When students feel like there is at least one person in the school who cares for them, they are more likely to come forward with concerns, or to report threats. The importance of establishing trusting student-faculty relationships cannot be overstated.

Fuselier and Daniels (2011) presented a model for establishing quality relationships with students through active listening. The Behavioral Change Stairway was developed by crisis (hostage) negotiators as a means of establishing trust, which can lead to behavioral change (see Fig. 19.1). Even where there is no crisis, these same methods may be used to build positive connections with students. From this model we see that the first step to connect with students is to employ active listening skills, such as identifying emotions, use of open-ended questions to elicit student discussion, paraphrasing, reflecting/mirroring emotions, and use of "I" messages.

As we listen to our students, we begin to develop empathy for them. Empathy is defined as understanding another person from his or her perspective, not from one's own, and is a critical component for the development of rapport. Once rapport is established, the student will learn to trust, enabling the adult to influence him or her. Such influence may entail sharing concerns about another student or personal problems. Once the adult has the capacity to influence the student, she or he may then help the student change his or her behavior (e.g., reporting a threat to the proper

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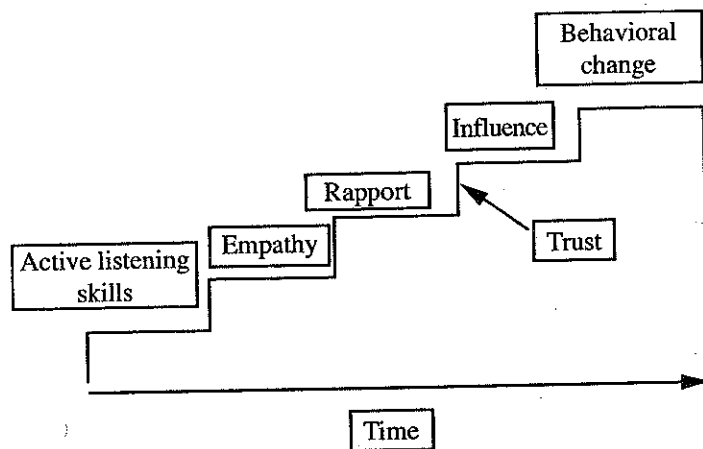


Fig. 19.1 Behavioral change stairway

authorities). Future research needs to validate the efficacy of the behavioral stairway model in breaking the code of silence in schools.

### 19.4.3 The School Culture

To gain a better understanding of the factors involved in school shootings, we (Daniels & Bradley, 2011) reviewed the research on the culture of schools where a shooting had been averted and compared it to the culture of schools where a shooting occurred. We found four common themes that were markedly more prevalent in schools in which a shooting took place: an inflexible culture, inequitable discipline, tolerance for disrespectful behavior, and a code of silence (Daniels & Bradley; O'Toole, 2000).

**Inflexible culture.** A school's culture consists of official and unofficial values and patterns of behavior and the associated relationships (O'Toole, 2000). When this culture is inflexible, it becomes insensitive to changes in society and may unwittingly cause a sense of not belonging among certain students. For example, if a school with an increasing Hispanic population fails to offer culturally specific instruction or clubs, the Hispanic students may feel separated and believe that they do not belong or are not valued. The inflexible culture, in effect, creates an "us-and-them" view of the school. While this is common across all schools, it has been shown to be particularly problematic in schools that experienced a shooting.

**Inequitable discipline.** Inequitable discipline exists when staff members apply school rules differently to different groups (O'Toole, 2000) and can intensify an outsider-view. For example, if certain students believe that athletes are not punished as harshly as they are, they may become resentful and develop contempt for the school and its personnel. Whether the perception is true or not

does not matter. While the vast majority of students will not act on this resentment, some school shooters did.

*Tolerance for disrespectful behavior.* If a school permits, or is perceived to permit, disrespectful behavior such as bullying, racism, and overt rudeness, the students bearing the brunt of such actions may feel they have no one to turn to, especially if they are aware that the school's policies on such behavior are very lenient (Daniels & Bradley, 2011). As a consequence, their frustration may lead to increases in acting out behaviors, aggression, or even violence.

*Code of silence.* A code of silence exists when students refuse to report important information about other students; such peer loyalty can have tragic consequences for schools (O'Toole, 2000). In schools where a shooting occurred, Vossekuil et al. (2000) established that most shooters informed others of their intentions before they took action; incredibly, not one confidante reported the information. The motivation for such secrecy is the fear of being labeled a "snitch" and being ostracized by other students. Daniels and Bradley (2011) postulate that the word "snitching" should be reframed to "helping": snitching involves telling on someone to get them in trouble; whereas helping would involve reporting concerns in order to help the person or others. Daniels and Bradley also find, "in addition to changing students' perceptions of snitching, our research points out the importance of, again, developing a culture of dignity and respect" (p. 54). Without this culture of respect, the code of silence will not be broken and potential events will not be reported.

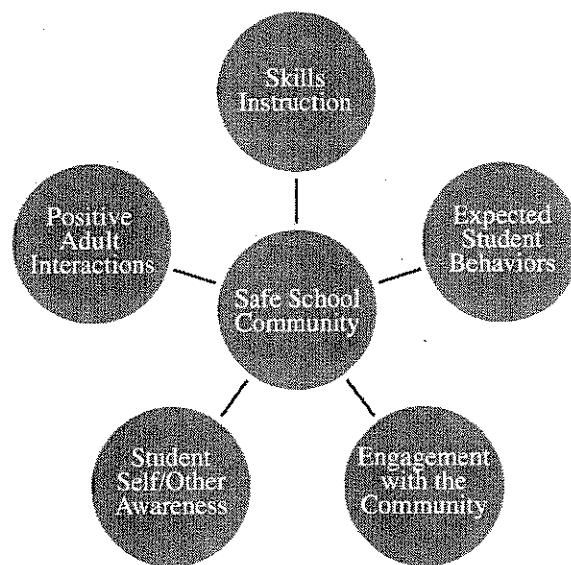
## 19.5 The Safe School Communities Model

Daniels and Bradley (2011) reviewed the research on lethal school violence, including the role of bullying, barricaded captive-taking in schools, averted school shootings, and building a positive school climate. Synthesizing result of this corpus of research, we developed the five-pronged Safe School Communities Model (see Fig. 19.2). Variables identified as supportive of enhanced school safety were clustered into the five elements of the model.

*Skills instruction.* Daniels and Bradley (2011) found that both students and school personnel benefit from instruction in various types of skills. Students need to learn communication skills, decision-making skills, problem-solving skills, conflict resolution skills, how to cooperate with others, self-control, and friendship-building skills. Each of these may be taught in developmentally appropriate ways and reinforced in classroom discussions. Since school staff are critical in fostering school safety (Kagan, 2001), Daniels and Bradley stress the importance of teaching faculty and staff crisis management skills. Quality instruction reduces classroom misbehavior and helps to create a positive classroom environment, so teachers need to continually work to improve their teaching abilities. Educational opportunities for faculty and staff are provided during in-service and conference workshops.

*Expected student behaviors.* One of the most basic steps in fostering a safe school community is to develop a clear definition of how students are expected to behave. In



**Fig. 19.2** The safe school communities model

fact, Finnian, Shnepel, and Anderson (2003) specifically found that a positive school environment utilizing clear behavior expectations promotes respect and mutual trust. For the students, expectations should center on a clear understanding of unacceptable behaviors (including bullying and disrespectful behavior) and the articulation of understandable consequences and clear conduct guidelines to be followed. For the staff, the emphasis should be on equitably enforcing behavior guidelines, seriously addressing all rumors, and promoting leadership and physical safety (Daniels & Bradley, 2011). The faculty and staff members should have a clear, concise rulebook to follow and should be trained on the importance of applying these rules consistently.

*Engagement with the community.* Encouraging extracurricular activities that promote interaction with the local citizenry helps establish a necessary bond between the school and the community (Daniels and Bradley (2011). When members of the community gather for athletic or creative performances, they take pride in the school and its students. Students benefit from gaining confidence and a sense of belonging. In addition, Benbenishty, Astor, and Estrada (2008) advocate opening a direct line of communication between schools and parents in order to conduct violence risk assessments at a local level, if there are justifiable reasons for doing so. They also recommend schools to develop forums and focus groups to encourage parents to express their views and concerns.

*Student self/other awareness.* Daniels and Bradley (2011) encourage schools to stress social, emotional, and ethical learning to increase student self/other awareness. This element also includes such issues as identification of one's own and others' feelings (emotional intelligence) and the development of empathy.

*Positive adult interactions.* Lastly, Daniels and Bradley (2011) stress the importance of developing positive adult interactions with all students, in part to break down any code of silence that could facilitate a school rampage (O'Toole, 2000). The staff, as confident authority figures, should provide positive role models for students; in



doing so, they must demonstrate warmth and a positive interest in the students as individuals. Support for the importance of having a positive role model in schools can also be found in Bandura's research demonstrating that children model adult behavior (1965). While all teachers may not be able to relate equally well to all students, there will usually be some member of staff for any type of student.

And finally, teachers and staff should receive at least some specialized training in recognizing emotional and social problems in students (Fox & Harding, 2005). Today, many are ill-equipped to recognize a student in crisis. Particular attention should be paid to students who have made threats toward other students and/or the general school population; those who may seem depressed, perpetually angry, or isolated and rejected; those whose behavior and/or school performance has changed abruptly; and those who have suffered a major loss or traumatic event. The school counselor, psychologist, or nurse may offer assistance in identifying and responding to students in crisis.

## 19.6 Addressing the School Culture

The research presented in this chapter highlights offender and environmental factors in schools that have experienced extreme violence. Attempts to apply these findings to the real world must begin with the environment in the school—the school culture—and specifically with the all-too-frequent mind-set that “it can’t happen here.” Benbenishty and Astor (2005) explained how views about violence on school campuses held by principals and administrators were vastly different from those of the students. The students believed that violence was more widespread in the school, whereas the administrators tended to downplay the prevalence of this violence. This illustrates a dangerous discrepancy between staff and students. Violence can, and does, happen and administrators, staff, students, parents, authorities, and the community at large must face this reality by paying serious attention to the issues involved.

As discussed earlier, schools affected by lethal violence historically tended to be permissive in allowing disrespectful behaviors, including bullying among and between students and staff. Furthermore, they had an inflexible culture that inadvertently supported a noninclusive “us-versus-them” mentality. They also tended to employ inequitable discipline practices that further supported the outsider mentality. After the violence, many schools attempted to crack down on behavior infractions and ultimately addressed these three issues, especially the inflexible culture and disrespectful behavior, by adopting a zero tolerance policy. Although intentions may have been good, these policies have been shown to be ineffective (American Psychological Association, 2008). In fact, it is now believed that a zero tolerance stance could encourage a code of silence by discouraging students from reporting minor violations. Mulvey and Cauffman (2001) found that policies promoting healthy environments are far more effective than punitive punishments.

Preventive measures must go beyond addressing the culture of the school. Various approaches and models have been developed to build safe school communities. One of the more comprehensive efforts is Daniels and Bradley's (2011) Safe School Communities Model, presented earlier. It must be noted that while this model is based on a synthesis of research into limiting school violence, the model itself has not yet been empirically validated.

## 19.7 Conclusion

Although infrequent in nature, the deleterious effect of school shootings on individuals and society is colossal. From the time children start kindergarten, parents trust that they will be safe when they drop them off at school; every time one of these incidents occurs, this trust is violated. With other forms of violence, people can often choose to avoid situations where violence may occur; avoiding school is rarely an option. Therefore, quality research about how to prevent school shootings is crucial to ensuring the safety of schools, allaying the fears of parents, and protecting the children. After all, it only takes one school shooting incident to instill fear into society, so learning ways to avoid them is paramount.

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