Chapter 1
A Brief History of School Violence and Disturbance in America

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ABSTRACT

George Santayana said, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” This chapter explores, in brief, the history of school violence. The intent of the authors is to help readers understand school violence from an historical context in hopes that a better understanding of what has happened will help inform attempts at reducing school violence in the future.

INTRODUCTION

Schooling is compulsory for all children in the United States, but the age range for which school attendance is required varies from state to state. Some states allow students to leave school between the ages of 14 and 17 with parental permission; before finishing high school. Other states require students to stay in school until their 18th birthday. Public education is typically from kindergarten to grade 12 and is referred to as K-12.

In today’s global economy, a high quality K-12 education is a prerequisite to success. As a nation we have created public education as a common place where children of all races, creeds, and income levels can gather to learn together. School environments should be conducive to learning and free from crime and violence; however, this is not always the case.

Columbine.
April 20, 1999.

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To paraphrase FDR, a date that will live in infamy. Of course we’re talking the high school mass killing. Twelve students dead. One teacher. Twenty one others injured. The perpetrators, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold.

From educators to the police, the idea that such could occur at a school was shocking and for many it was the first school killing, school violence that anyone had heard of. Speculation abounded as to what could have motivated the killers. Bullying? Depression? Psychopathy? Video games? Bad parenting? The Goth subculture? Music? Something else? And of course, the usual suspect, guns. To date it’s doubtful anyone really knows what motivated the two killers. As with most things criminogenic, it was probably some combination of the above (and other possibilities) and it’s quite likely that what motivated one killer was not a motivator for the other.

Of course, since Columbine, there have many more mass killings at schools of all levels, as well as other locations. And with each incident the same question(s) seem to present themselves.

Why?
How?
What could have been done to prevent it? And many more.

Post Columbine both education and policing changed many of their policies or response to such incidents and to the perpetrators as well. School security became of paramount importance (to some schools), anti-____ (fill in the blank) policies were instituted in an attempt to identify if not stop the perpetrator before such an incident could occur. Many of these have come to be identified as zero tolerance policies. And youth as young as six and seven were disciplined for military drawings, playing cops and robbers on the playground, making a finger gun, making a pop tart into a gun, etc. All well intentioned attempts to Stop the Violence.

The police changed as well. School resource officers (SROs) became more prevalent if resisted by many an educator. The idea of waiting for the Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) became “Dealing with Active Shooters,” rapid deployment when an incident occurs. As officers arrive, instead of creating a perimeter and waiting for SWAT, officers enter, search and engage the suspect(s). Subsequent to Columbine, this approach no doubt saved many lives.

The United States Secret Service entered the discussion as well, publishing a report in 2002. As with terrorists, especially Lone Wolves, the Secret Service suggested that the focus needed to be on pre-attack behaviors, noting that physical security measures, zero tolerance policies, even SROs are likely to be less than helpful in preventing an incident. Their findings included:

- Incidents of targeted violence at school were rarely sudden, impulsive acts.
- Prior to most incidents, other people knew about the attacker’s idea and/or plan to attack.
- Most attackers did not threaten their targets directly prior to advancing the attack.
- There is no accurate or useful profile of students who engaged in targeted school violence.
- Most attackers engaged in some behavior prior to the incident that caused others concern or indicated a need for help.
- Most attackers had difficulty coping with significant losses or personal failures. Moreover, many had considered or attempted suicide.
- Many attackers felt bullied, persecuted, or injured by others prior to the attack.
- Most attackers had access to and had used weapons prior to the attack.