Chapter 13

K–12 Alma Mater School Shootings With ≥2 Killed, 1990–2018

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, the authors examine what they call “alma mater” school shootings - those in which a current or former student returns to attack people at the school. In this case, the focus is on K-12 school shootings in the United States between 1990 and 2018 where two or more individuals were killed. They argue that many shooters target their alma mater because it is the place where they have experienced “place trauma” - emotional pain that is intertwined with a location. After discerning common demographic, personal, and spatiotemporal patterns, they discuss how the shooters acquired the firearms used to carry out the attack. Finally, the authors outline policy and practice considerations focusing on education, school funding, and legislation.

INTRODUCTION

In many countries, schools are safe havens where children develop academic, social, and personal skills free from worry about personal safety. Parents in these countries have little reason to be concerned that anyone, let alone an attacker brandishing a firearm, would want or be able to harm their children. In contrast, school shootings have become so commonplace in the U.S. that many do not even make national news headlines. For many U.S. students, the “new normal” consists of strapping on a clear or bulletproof backpack in the morning, being escorted to and from the school bus, an intimidating school
gate and metal detector greeting them at the entrance, armed police, teachers, and staff surveilling them throughout the day, random locker searches, and active shooter drills. This “new normal” is terrifying to all, and impedes the educational process in a variety of ways.

While the occasional school shooter news headline and an overabundance of school safety measures have impacted public attitudes, academic researchers rely more heavily on national quantitative data to ascertain the actual risk of gun violence. The Center for Homeland Defense and Security (CHDS) documents every instance at a U.S. K-12 school when “a gun is brandished, is fired or a bullet hits school property for any reason, regardless of the number of victims, time, day of the week, or reason (e.g., planned attack, accidental, domestic violence, gang-related).” According to the data, there were 163 such instances in the 1970’s, 218 in the 1980’s, 265 in the 1990’s, 353 in the 2000’s, and 380 in the 2010’s as of 7/28/19 (CHDS, 2019). These data verify that guns in schools and school shootings have become a public health issue demanding serious analyses and targeted intervention strategies.

Many of these gun incidents entail a current or former student who has returned to the school brandishing a firearm with the explicit intent of committing violence against students, teachers, staff, and the school itself. We refer to these incidents as “alma mater” school shootings – shootings at schools that the shooter currently or formerly attended. While the term “alma mater” is often used to designate a school or college from which an individual has graduated, the term can also include a school that an individual attended or is attending, even if they have not graduated.

Most school shooters commit the act at their alma mater, which speaks to the social, personal, and emotional significance of the physical location. If they wanted to, these shooters could attack perceived wrongdoers at their homes, in public, at parties, or at other locations. Or, if these shooters are angry at society or schools in general, they could target schools in other districts. Instead, they carry out their horrendous acts at the school they attended – the place where they felt deeply victimized.

We put forth the concept of place trauma to denote emotional pain associated with a physical location. As Hochschild (2010) has noted, places are not merely backdrops for social interaction, they are imbued with meaning which is constructed, challenged, and reconstructed by people. For schoolchildren, the hallways, classrooms, lockers, gymnasium, cafeteria, locker rooms, playground, and parking lot are the places where identities are formed, memories are made, and socialization occurs. For school shooters, these places are often imbued with feelings of failure, humiliation, and oppression. Physical and psychological victimization may have occurred, love interests may have been rejected, and schoolwork and behavior may have been harshly corrected by teachers and administrators. While a school shooter may have one or more specific targets in mind, the fact that he is motivated to procure a firearm(s), carry it onto school property, and wildly spray bullets on school premises indicates that his school is a place of immense pain.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Although there is a significant amount of data indicating an increase of guns and gun violence in schools, scholars, law enforcement, and policy makers often use differing terminology to discuss these issues. As a consequence, academic researchers, media outlets, and law enforcement agencies often use different definitions when discussing mass shootings. This obfuscation complicates our understanding of mass shooting trends, as well as factors associated with mass shootings. For example, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) defines a mass murderer as someone who “kills four or more people in a
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