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THE RISK OF SCHOOL RAMPAGE

Assessing and Preventing
Threats of School
Violence

Eric Madfis





The Risk of School Rampage

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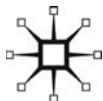
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The Risk of School Rampage: Assessing and Preventing Threats of School Violence

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Contents

Preface	viii
1 Introduction	1
Research questions and background information on averted school rampage incidents	2
Explaining and reacting to school rampage	6
School rampage as a social problem	6
The causes of school rampage	7
Averted school rampage	8
Responding to rampage—current school disciplinary and security practices	11
Responding to rampage—violence risk assessment	13
Understanding school criminalization and risk assessment as actuarial justice	18
2 Assessing the Substance and Risk of Student Rampage Threats	23
Distinguishing threats, risks, plots, and genuine aversion	26
Examining the form and content of threats in averted rampage violence	27
Examining the levels of risk in averted rampage violence	29
Examining plots and planning in averted rampage violence	31

Examining the notion of aversion in rampage violence	31
The assessment of evidence in averted rampage violence	31
Assessing the plot's detail	32
Appraising the role of weaponry	38
Assessing the role of personal and group characteristics	43
Conclusion	54
3 Confidence and Doubts about Assessing Averted Rampage Violence	56
Variations in confidence and doubt by risk assessment type	57
Certainty based on a convergence of risk assessment criteria	58
Certainty based on lack of threat assessment criteria	59
Certainty based on threat assessment criteria in spite of deviation from profiles	62
Remaining uncertainty despite risk assessment	63
Conclusion	65
4 Preventing School Rampage Violence through Student Bystander Intervention and Positive School Environments	69
School rampage violence prevention and the student code of silence	70
Perceiving a diminished student code of silence since Columbine	74
Weakening the code of silence through positive school climate	75
Breaking the code of silence—interventions through leakage	78
Indirectly informed bystanders	78
Directly informed confidants	79
Threatened targets	80
Involved co-conspirators	80
How interventions occurred and who was trusted	83

Following the code of silence—the persistence of bystander inaction	84
Implications of findings	87
Conclusion	90
5 Summary of Findings, Policy Implications, and Future Research	
Summary and implications of findings	96
Suggested areas for future research	100
6 Methodological Appendix	104
Operationalizing school rampage and averted threat	105
Research design and sample	108
Complications of relying on the news media to build a sampling frame	113
On qualitative methodology	114
Generalizability in qualitative research	115
References	117
Index	140

Preface

Over the last few decades, school rampage shootings have taken multiple lives and caused widespread fear throughout the United States. During this same period, however, dozens of potential incidents have also been averted wherein student plots to kill multiple peers and faculty members came to the attention of authorities and thus were thwarted. This book investigates how such successes occurred, utilizing data gleaned from in-depth interviews conducted with 32 school and police officials (administrators, counselors, security and police officers, and teachers) who were directly involved in assessing and preventing what many perceived to be potential rampages at 11 public middle and high schools across the Northeastern United States. A multi-tiered method was employed to examine the process by which threats of rampage violence are assessed by school and police officials as well as how previous school rampage plots have been averted. Interview data about the 11 averted incidents were triangulated via news media reporting and legal documentation (such as court transcripts, arrest reports, and legal briefs) in order to verify concordance with and inconsistencies among the interviewees' accounts of their threat assessments and crime prevention practices.

The resultant data provide insight into the institutional cultures and practices that were involved in determining the magnitude of school rampage risks and ultimately enabling various potential attacks to be foiled. In addition, the findings also serve as a means through which to better understand contemporary perspectives on the fear, risk

assessment, and criminalization of American youth. The way in which school authorities have reacted to the school rampage phenomenon reveals a great deal about our current justice mindset, which often views the identification, surveillance, and management of potentially dangerous individuals as the best approach to what is understood as the inevitability of crime. Subsequently, this research reveals the significant shortcomings and sometimes harmful consequences of contemporary risk assessment, violence prevention, and punishment practices prominent in American schools.

By examining averted incidents, this work addresses problematic gaps in school violence scholarship and reveals both practical implications for the assessment and prevention of school violence and significant theoretical insight regarding the causes and consequences of enhanced school discipline and security.

Broadly, this book explores perceptions of and reactions to threats of rampage school violence. In Chapter 1, readers will be introduced to the phenomenon of school rampage, the literature on the causes and reactions to prior incidents of school violence, and the field of violence risk assessment. This chapter will also situate the American reaction to school rampage in the broader social context of contemporary school disciplinary and security practices and will provide theoretical background for explaining recent developments through insights from the sociology of risk, actuarial justice, and neoliberal penality. The second chapter illustrates how school and police officials engage in violence risk assessment by examining the forms of evidence present when claims are made that a school rampage threat has been averted. After categorizing the forms of risk assessment that have been utilized, Chapter 3 addresses the extent to which and under what circumstances officials express confidence in their use of risk assessment. The fourth chapter covers the manner in which student threats of rampage violence have come to the attention of parents, police, and school authorities in order to be averted and considers the extent to which students have actually broken through a code of silence which discourages them from informing on their peers. In addition, as many contemporary school violence prevention practices (such as enhanced discipline and increased surveillance) were not found to play a decisive role in preventing these incidents, alternative approaches from restorative justice are suggested to improve school climates, and accordingly, to increase positive bystander behavior on the part of students. Chapter 5 presents a discussion of the findings as a whole along

with the policy and theoretical implications that may be drawn from them and suggests areas for future research. Finally, Chapter 6 serves as a methodological appendix and addresses the research design of the project as well as the benefits and potential limitations of the study's methods.

1

Introduction

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Over the last ten years in the United States, there have been hundreds of school rampage plots that have successfully been averted (Daniels et al. 2007; O'Toole 2000; Trump n.d.). During this same period, however, American schools have prioritized discipline and security in a manner which has exaggerated the extent of school violence as a social problem and dramatically transformed public education as a social institution. In the wake of numerous highly publicized multiple-victim school homicides that occurred during the 1990s, American schools responded with massive changes to their disciplinary policies and security apparatuses. With the intention of preventing future rampage shootings, schools implemented increased security through school resource officers (hereafter, SROs), cameras, locked doors, and lockdown procedures, and expanded discipline via zero tolerance policies with mandatory arrests and school exclusions. This cluster of practices, which Hirshfield and Celinska (2011) have collectively referred to as "school criminalization," represent the fairly recent but pervasive incursion of law enforcement personnel, ideology, and technology into the school setting. In addition, many school officials and academics responded with a risk assessment approach by focusing upon the identification of potential school shooters through warning sign check lists, behavioral profiles, and threat assessments.

Whatever failures or successes these varied approaches have had with regard to fighting school crime or violence more generally, no prior scholarship has looked at the numerous cases of rampage plots which have actually been averted in order to discern if and when any of these developments have actually played a preventative role. In fact, with the exception of a few recent studies (Daniels et al. 2007; 2010; Larkin 2009; Pollack et al. 2008), social scientists possess almost no information on the rampage attacks which have been plotted and planned, but never came to fruition. Through their exploration, this study endeavors to understand not only how schools assess violent threats and construct risk generally and at times problematically, but also what social and individual forces have been at work to prevent instances of rampage violence from taking place.

Research questions and background information on averted school rampage incidents

Averted incidents of school rampage offer a unique opportunity for social scientific investigation. As there has been little empirical research

on how previous rampage plots have been thwarted, most of the rhetorical arguments regarding how future attacks are to be prevented amount to mere speculation and rely on many problematic assumptions about the unlimited benefits and minimal consequences of enhanced school criminalization and risk assessment.

First, this book will explore the process by which schools engage in the risk assessment of their students. To what extent are school officials aware of various forms of violence risk assessment and what are their perspectives regarding the utility of these techniques? Which approaches are utilized for what purposes? What criteria do police and school officials deem most important in the assessment of student threat? How do school officials manage student threats and maintain a sense of safety in the school community? A second goal of this research was to ascertain how student threats of rampage violence have been successfully averted. In particular, how have these threats come to the attention of authorities? What role did risk assessment and the expansion of punitive discipline and enhanced security in schools play in the prevention of the rampage plots? What additional factors, policies, or procedures permitted the rampage to be averted?

My data reveal that, between the years 2000–2009, there were at least 195 averted incidents where student plots to kill multiple peers and faculty members came to the attention of authorities and thus were thwarted. I conducted in-depth interviews with 32 school and police officials (administrators, counselors, security and police officers, and teachers) directly involved in assessing and preventing potential rampages at 11 middle and high schools located across the Northeastern United States.

All of the 11 schools that granted me permission for interviews were public institutions. Nine were high schools, one was a middle school, and one was a junior/senior high school. Two were located in Pennsylvania, one was in New York, two were in New Jersey, three were in Massachusetts, and three were in Connecticut. All 11 schools were located in communities where the vast majority of residents were white. Six of these schools were located in suburban predominantly middle class communities, four of them were located in affluent suburban areas, and one school was in a lower middle class rural community (please consult Chapter 6 for additional demographic information about schools and their communities). In order to preserve the anonymity of participants, pseudonyms have been used for all individuals and schools, and no sources (whether news media reporting or legal documentation on specific cases) can be explicitly referenced or

cited. This is consistent with how Daniels and his colleagues (2007; 2010; 2011) presented their findings on incidents of averted school rampage.

In the first case at Adams High School, a 16-year-old male student, who later admitted to making and exploding more than 40 bombs in the woods near his suburban home, sent videos of himself firing his father's guns and using the homemade explosives to a friend. The friend's mother notified the police, and numerous weapons, including two assault rifles, and detailed plans to commit a rampage attack at his school were seized from the teenager's bedroom.

The second case occurred at the affluent Blane High School, where several students came forward to inform administrators that one of their peers had brought explosives to school with him. When school officials searched this student's backpack, they discovered tennis balls filled with explosives. Later, police found four additional explosive devices at the student's home.

In the third incident, a 15-year-old student at Courtside High School stole three handguns and hundreds of rounds of ammunition from his father's safe. According to the best friend he entrusted to hold onto these weapons for him, he intended to use them in his plan to attack the school.

A fourth incident ended when three teenagers were arrested while walking down a street carrying an arsenal of weapons and thousands of rounds of ammunition, after failing in their attempt to steal a car. They intended to use the vehicle to embark on a killing spree throughout their town, including a massacre of students at Donovan High School who had teased them.

The fifth case involved three teenage students at Everton High School creating very detailed and threatening profiles on a social networking website. These profiles featured, among many other disturbing images and words, a digital countdown clock ticking down to the anniversary of the Columbine massacre and several communications and videos expressing the desire to kill lots of people.

Four students at Finley High School, in the sixth incident, were involved in elaborate planning and extensive training to commit a rampage attack at their school. Despite many attempts, these students were never able to attain their own firearms, but they did acquire BB guns, knives, axes, gunpowder, and several homemade explosives. When one of the conspirator's dedication to carrying out their deadly plans became in question, the other three plotters went to school authorities