PRIOR KNOWLEDGE OF POTENTIAL SCHOOL-BASED VIOLENCE:

INFORMATION STUDENTS LEARN MAY PREVENT A TARGETED ATTACK

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Prior Knowledge of Potential School-Based Violence: Information students learn may prevent a targeted attack[1]

In the wake of several high-profile shootings at schools in the United States, most notably the shootings that occurred at Columbine High School on April 20, 1999, the United States Secret Service (Secret Service) and the United States Department of Education (ED) embarked on a collaborative endeavor to study incidents of planned (or *targeted*) violence in our nation's schools. Initiated in 1999, the study, termed the Safe School Initiative (SSI), examined several issues, most notably whether past school-based attacks were planned, and what could be done to prevent future attacks.

The SSI employed a method similar to an earlier Secret Service study, the Exceptional Case Study Project (ECSP), that examined targeted attacks on public officials and public figures (Fein & Vossekuil, 1999). In the ECSP the Secret Service coined the term *targeted violence* and defined it as any incident of violence where a known or knowable attacker selects a particular target prior to the violent attack (Fein, Vossekuil, & Holden, 1995). As with the ECSP, the SSI employed an operational focus to assist those involved with school safety to improve prevention efforts by increasing knowledge of targeted violence in schools. By studying past incidents of targeted violence in schools, the Secret Service and ED examined whether pre-attack behaviors of perpetrators could be identified to prevent future attacks.

The SSI identified specific incidents of targeted school violence and analyzed the attackers' behavioral pathways, from the initial idea of the attacks to the violent conclusions. This involved an in-depth study of 37 incidents of targeted school violence involving 41 perpetrators, which took place in the United States from January 1974 through May 2000. A full report of the findings as well as the significant implications for both practical application and further investigation may be found in two jointly published Secret Service/ED reports: *The Final Report and Findings of the Safe School Initiative: Implications for the Prevention of School Attacks in the United States* (Vossekuil, Fein, Reddy, Borum, & Modzeleski, 2002) and *Threat Assessment in Schools: A Guide to Managing Threatening Situations and to Creating Safe School Climates* (Fein et al., 2002). The reports focused on 10 key findings from the SSI:

- Incidents of targeted violence at schools rarely were sudden impulsive acts.
- Most attackers did not threaten their targets directly prior to advancing the attack.
- There was no useful or accurate "profile" of students who engaged in targeted school violence.
- 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.
- Despite prompt law enforcement responses, most shooting incidents were stopped by means other than law enforcement interventions.

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[1] The study is on file with the McLean Hospital Institutional Review Board (IRB) under the title "A Systematic Pilot Study of Student Responses to Prior Knowledge of Potential School-Based Violence: What can we learn about life-sustaining prevention?"

- In many cases, other students were involved in some capacity.
- Most attackers engaged in some behavior prior to the incident that caused others concern or indicated a need for help.
- Prior to the incidents, other people knew about the attacker's idea and/or plan to attack.

While each of these findings is important and may be useful in detecting and preventing future attacks, the final two findings in particular highlight further areas of inquiry. First, the perpetrators exhibited concerning behavior prior to the attack in 93% of the incidents. This suggests that attacks might have been avoided with proper observation techniques and more open sharing of information. Second, and more significant, at least one other person had some type of knowledge of the attacker's plan in 81% of the incidents and more than one person had such knowledge in 59% of the incidents. Of those individuals who had prior knowledge, 93% were peers of the perpetrators – friends, schoolmates, or siblings (Vossekuil et al., 2002).

Study Purpose

The SSI findings highlight that in most targeted school-based attacks, individuals, referred to as *bystanders* in this report, had some type of advanced knowledge about planned school violence. Despite this advanced knowledge, the attacks still occurred. This study aimed to further the prevention of targeted school-based attacks by exploring how students with prior knowledge of attacks made decisions regarding what steps, if any, to take after learning the information.[2] The study sought to identify what might be done to encourage more students to share information they learn about potential targeted school-based violence with one or more adults.

Among the topics covered in semi-structured interviews with participants were the following key questions:

- What information was known by the bystander in advance of the attack?
- What relationship did the bystander have to the perpetrator(s)?
- Did the bystander share the information he or she learned of the planned violence with others?
- Was the bystander alone in his or her knowledge of the planned attack or was there discussion with other bystanders? If there was discussion among several bystanders, was there an agreement among them as to whether to report the information?
- How much did personal characteristics of the bystander as compared with issues related to the school climate influence the bystander's decision regarding whether to come forward with the information?
- What were the relationships and levels of interpersonal connections between the bystander and responsible adults?
- In retrospect, how did the bystander feel about his or her decision regarding whether to take action? What advice would the bystander give others?

[2] This study was conducted in partnership with McLean Hospital, a teaching affiliate of Harvard Medical School, and underwent human participants review through its IRB. The principal investigator was William S. Pollack.

Method

Study Participants

Initially, potential participants were identified in reference to two groups. One group included those students who had prior knowledge of planned school violence and were believed to have shared that knowledge to avert the planned attack. Participants in this group were identified through online searches of publicly available material, as well as through outreach to law enforcement and school personnel, for information about school shootings that were averted and individuals who had prior knowledge of the threatened targeted school violence. The second group included those students who had prior knowledge of planned targeted school violence and who attended a school where a shooting occurred. Participants in this group were drawn from the 37 cases originally studied in the SSI. Participants who indicated that they had some type of prior knowledge were identified from a review of media reports, law enforcement records, and court records contained in the SSI case files. In all, 198 bystanders were identified from the files with the number of bystanders identified per incident ranging from 0 to 28. Individuals who actively planned or encouraged the attack were omitted from the study.

Once potential participants were identified, researchers determined whether each participant met the study's inclusion criteria. Initially, participants were to be selected based on considerations related to the recency of the case, the participant's level of knowledge regarding the planned school attack, and the participant's relationship with the perpetrator of the attack. However, when recruitment for the study proved difficult more emphasis was placed on the participant's accessibility and willingness to be interviewed.

Researchers contacted 29 individuals who met the study's inclusion criteria. Fourteen of the individuals contacted either refused participation in the study or did not complete the informed consent process in spite of several outreach attempts. Thus, the final study participants consisted of 15 individuals, six of whom had prior knowledge of a potential threat and attended a school at which a school shooting was averted, and nine of whom had prior knowledge of a potential threat and attended a school at which a school shooting occurred. The six participants in the first group were drawn from four independent incidents in which a school attack was averted (two participants each from two incidents and one participant each from two separate incidents). The nine participants in the second group also were drawn from four independent incidents in which a shooting occurred at school (four participants from one incident, three participants from another incident, and one participant each from two separate incidents). In total, the participants represented eight school locations. At the time of the study, the participants ranged in age from 13 to 30 years.

Procedure

A member of the research team telephoned each participant (or legal guardian if the participant was a minor) and described the nature of the study and its benefits and risks. If the participant agreed, consent forms were mailed to the participant for review. The consent forms, approved by the McLean Hospital Institutional Review Board (IRB), included versions for adults and minors aged 13 to 17 years. The forms addressed two aspects of consent: consent to participate in the study interview and consent to have the study interview videotaped. Fourteen participants

consented to videotaping of their study interviews. Once the signed consent forms were returned, a confidential location was agreed upon for the interview.

Study data were gathered via review of SSI case files, public sources, and a semi-structured interview with each participant (n=15). The data were analyzed by researcher reviews of the taped interviews, first independently and later in conference. Case vignettes, included as an Appendix, were developed from the subject interviews.

In the process of reviewing the data, the researchers observed similarities as well as some differences between the group of students who had prior knowledge of planned targeted school violence and came forward with the information to avert the violence, and the group of students who had such prior knowledge but attended a school at which violence occurred. Due to the overlapping data and an emerging continuum between these two groups, which originally had been expected to be more distinct in nature, the groups were collapsed into one group for purposes of analysis.

Findings

Six key findings were identified. Given the small sample size and the exploratory nature of the study, generalization from these findings may be limited.

1. The relationships between the bystanders and the attackers, as well as when and how the bystanders came upon information about the planned attacks, varied.
From the original SSI case files, there was information available about the relationship between 119 of the bystanders and the attackers. Of those, 34% were friends with the attacker, 29% were acquaintances/co-workers/schoolmates, 6% were family members, and in 31% of the cases the relationship was of another type or unknown. Eighty-two percent of the bystanders received information directly from the attacker and 13% were told secondhand.[3] Details about when the bystander learned the information were available in 91 of the cases. A majority of those individuals received the information more than a day before the attack. Fifty-nine percent were told days or weeks in advance, 22% were told months or years prior, and 19% were told a few hours or less before the attack.

2. Bystanders shared information related to a threat along a continuum that ranged from bystanders who took no action to those who actively conveyed the information.
Participants displayed a range in their actions and willingness to come forward. A continuum emerged between bystanders who took no action and those bystanders who were proactive in conveying information related to the threat to others. For instance, while some came forward without external prompting and were entirely forthcoming, others revealed the information they knew only after repeated prodding from adults, including school safety officials. In addition, some bystanders did not share their information with anyone or attempt to come forward, while others discussed the information with, or sought the advice of, peers and adults. Information from the SSI case files indicated that only 4% of the individuals with prior knowledge attempted to dissuade the attacker from violence.

[3] It was unknown how the remaining 5% of the bystanders became aware of the potential threat.

3. School climate affected whether bystanders came forward with information related to the threats.
Some bystanders reported that the school climate influenced their decisions to share information with the school staff regarding the threats. Bystanders who came forward with information commented that they were influenced by positive relations with one or more adults, teachers, or staff, and/or a feeling within the school that the information would be taken seriously and addressed appropriately. Similarly, students who displayed a reluctance to come forward indicated that they anticipated a negative response from the school had they shared information.

- One student who knew of a weapon on school property was reluctant to come forward because he expected a negative reaction: "When you say something, you get in trouble or interrogated by teachers."

4. Some bystanders disbelieved that the attacks would occur and thus did not report them.
A number of bystanders reported not disclosing information related to the threat to a responsible adult because they did not believe the event would ever occur. Several factors contributed to this belief, to include:

- The student made the threat or voiced the plan repeatedly and over a long period of time, had been engaged in what might be considered attention-seeking behaviors, and had made peculiar comments.
- The described threat seemed unbelievable because it was so extreme. In one case, a bystander who had overheard some of the conspirators discussing their plans in great detail "didn't think anything of it . . . [didn't] think they would really do it" and therefore the bystander did not tell anyone.
- The student's tone when making the threat did not seem serious or it was thought he was joking. For instance, bystanders made comments such as "he kept eating his pizza while discussing the event" and "he'd say it violently but then laugh about it."
- The threats or statements were overt, repetitive, and/or clearly overheard by school personnel. This led the students to mistakenly believe that the threateners (and therefore the threats) were not serious.

5. Bystanders often misjudged the likelihood and immediacy of the planned attack.
Bystanders reported that often they did not come forward with information related to the potential attack because they felt they had more time to decide on an appropriate action. Whether the potential attacker shared specific or vague information with the bystander was not a determinant of the bystander's assessment of the likelihood of an attack or its imminence.

6. In some situations, parents and parental figures influenced whether the bystander reported the information related to the potential attack to school staff or other adults in positions of authority.
Bystanders were questioned regarding the influence parents and other adults in their lives may have had on their decision to share information related to the potential attack. For example, one bystander felt comfortable sharing her concerns with other adults because her parents reassured her it was the correct thing to do. In contrast, another bystander consulted a parent figure in his life and was advised to "mind his own business." The bystander did not share information related to the potential attack, and the following day a shooting occurred at his school.

Implications

Although the generalizability of this study's findings is limited due to the exploratory nature of the study and the small number of participants, several implications were derived from a review of its data and findings. These implications may impact whether a shooting at a school is prevented by encouraging students to come forward when they learn of an event that may cause harm to themselves, other students, or faculty. Further, these implications may help faculty, staff, and other adults take appropriate action when they become aware of a threatening situation.

1. Schools should ensure a climate in which students feel comfortable sharing information they have regarding a potentially threatening situation with a responsible adult.
One factor that contributed to a bystander's decision to share knowledge of planned school violence was the student's positive emotional connection to the school and to its staff (see also Fein et al., 2002). Bystanders who did not share information related to the planned attack reported no connection to the school or a negative perception of the school climate. They also expressed discomfort speaking to anyone, or believed that if they did speak to someone they either would not be believed or would get into trouble. Further, bystanders were reluctant to come forward if they felt that school officials would not keep the source of the information confidential, which would open the bystander to potential ridicule and retribution.

Conversely, in those instances where bystanders with information about a possible attack felt a positive emotional connection with the school or with someone on the staff, they were comfortable coming forward and reporting what they knew. If the bystanders knew they would be believed and the information they provided would be protected, they were more likely to come forward with that information.

Developing meaningful social and emotional connections with students and creating a climate of mutual respect are essential to keeping schools safe. Such a climate encourages all students with information about threats against the school or its students to share the information with a responsible adult. Students in this study felt connected to the school when they believed someone in the school knew them and cared for them. Schools demonstrate their commitments to such climates by promoting social and emotional connections between students, staff, and teachers in everyday interactions and activities. Simple and genuine measures, such as regularly greeting students, talking to students, and addressing students by name, help to make students feel connected and part of the school.

Law enforcement officers and educators need to convey clearly to students that merely reporting information about potential threats will not subject the student to negative consequences and/or liability. In this study, many bystanders feared negative consequences would result if they were to bring information forward. Schools and law enforcement need to counter this negative preconception by emphasizing the value of the information that the students may hold and reassuring them that sharing will not cause harm. Because attackers sometimes communicate vague information prior to an attack, a student may be wary of overreacting and getting someone in trouble. It should be explained to students that any reported information or threats will be investigated and appropriate action will be taken.

Creating a school climate in which students believe the school staff wants to hear from them about threats or possible attacks is critical to ensuring that students come forward. Students should be encouraged to come forward regardless of the amount of information they have, and school staff should convey to the students that if they do share information about potential school violence they will be supported. If students do not feel that they will be treated with respect and listened to in a non-judgmental manner, or that the information will not be protected, they will not come forward and the school will lose an opportunity to intervene in a possible attack, as well as assist a troubled student.

2. School districts are encouraged to develop policies that address the many aspects of reporting a threat.

While many schools have policies that address threatening behavior, these policies do not always attend to all aspects of reporting threats, such as what procedure a student should follow in reporting a threat and what the school's role is when such information is received. School policies should:

- Encourage students, staff, faculty, parents, and others to report all apparent threats or threatening or disturbing behaviors.
- Provide several options for the reporting of threats, including reporting anonymously if necessary.
- Ensure that all those who report a threat or threatening situation will be treated with respect and that the information they provide will be closely guarded.
- Emphasize that the school will take appropriate action on all reports and will, within the confines of privacy laws, provide feedback to the reporting student that the information was received, and that appropriate action was taken.
- Articulate what types of student information and knowledge can be shared, with whom it can be shared, and under what conditions it can be shared.
- Be clear as to who is responsible for acting on information received regarding threats.
- Where the law permits, include law enforcement and mental health officials in the review process.
- Track threats over time so that the information collected regarding threats can be used in the decision-making process.

To prevent crime and violence effectively and intercede when necessary, it would be helpful for schools to know what types of criminal acts occur and the frequency of those acts. While many school districts have some mechanisms to track incidents that occur in schools, few of them track threats made against other students or the school (especially if the event did not result in official law enforcement intervention). The result of this failure to collect and maintain records regarding threats is that very little is known about the extent or nature of the problem. Collecting more data about threats will permit law enforcement officials and educators to learn more about what students or groups of students have previously engaged in these behaviors, the manner in which they threatened others, the actions taken by the school and law enforcement in response, and the outcome. Analysis of this information can lead to the development of a more effective targeted violence prevention strategy.

3. Teachers, administrators, and other faculty should be trained on how to properly respond to students who provide them with information about a threatening or disturbing situation, as well as how to deal with actual threats.
Students talk among themselves in lunchrooms, hallways, and classrooms about a wide variety of topics, including inappropriate behaviors (such as bullying, harassment, and name calling) and criminal activities (such as drug sales, possession of weapons, and threats or plots against other students or the school). Staff and faculty may hear this information but sometimes discount it as typical youthful talk that does not warrant concern. However, staff and faculty would be advised to take these conversations seriously and investigate further when the situation suggests such action.

Schools are encouraged to train their faculty and staff to listen to what students are saying and, if they hear information about a potentially dangerous act, report it to the designated authority or committee within the school so that an inquiry may be initiated.

Conclusion

This examination into why some students who knew of planned school attacks came forward and reported what they knew, while others did not, is meant to be an exploratory pilot study. Although the number of participants was expected to be relatively small, it was not anticipated that recruiting study participants would be as difficult. The low number of participants is attributable to a variety of factors, to include the length of time since some of the incidents occurred (e.g. some cases occurred 20 to 30 years ago) and that some bystanders were reluctant to speak of their experiences. Despite the relatively small sample size, the information gained from this pilot study provides some insight for those involved with the prevention of school violence. Additional research that builds upon the findings of this pilot study should be conducted so that additional barriers to reporting information may be identified and overcome.

The data gathered as part of this study support several of the findings of the SSI. For example, many bystanders did not assess threats of violence made by other students as serious because they did not believe the person posed a real danger. The SSI recognized that a single individual, whether a student or adult, is often not equipped to adequately assess if a particular person poses a threat of targeted violence. The SSI recommended the creation of school threat assessment teams to examine all threats to make an initial determination as to whether the threat is valid. This initial review would then be followed by a law enforcement-led investigation. A team approach would allow students to share information related to threats with adults in the school and allow a more formal assessment as to whether the student(s) posed a danger.

Further, the SSI found that while what a person *said* was an important part of any inquiry or investigation, even more important was an examination of that person's *behavior*. The SSI revealed that some shooters made inappropriate words or statements over a long period of time, resulting in their statements being disregarded as idle chatter. While words alone are not always indicative of a potential attack, when viewed in the context of one's behavior they provide insight into one's potential or probable actions.

This study also highlights the importance of a school climate where adults encourage students to come forward with information about threats and other concerning behavior, without fearing punishment, ridicule, or not being taken seriously. All communities should develop school policies and practices to ensure students come forward when they have information about a threat or possible attack.

Appendix: Case Studies

In one interview, the bystander noted that the incident at his school occurred before the "wake-up call" of the shooting at Columbine High School. In retrospect, he described being concerned when, prior to the shooting, the shooter aimed a gun at him in response to an action by the bystander. Also, the bystander spoke to the shooter the day before the incident and he recalled that something about the conversation concerned him enough that he sought the advice of a trusted adult. After some questioning, the adult advised the bystander that he did not need to tell anyone about his concerns. The bystander accepted the advice and the following day his friend carried out a shooting at the school resulting in the deaths of some of his peers.

In addition to accepting the adult's advice to not share his concerns, the bystander shared two additional reasons he did not share the information with others. First, he said it was "hard to believe [a school shooting] could happen" in his own community. Although the bystander recalled that he did not take the possibility of an actual shooting seriously, he mentioned that he, along with several friends and the shooter, discussed how the techniques used to carry out a recent school shooting that was widely covered in the media, could have been improved. Since the bystander felt, from his own perspective, that he was only engaging in fanciful teenage bravado ("kidding around"), he assumed all of his friends also were engaging in the same joking behavior, including the soon-to-be attacker. Second, some reluctance was clearly related to his lack of a positive connection to anyone in a position of authority in his own school. He said he found adults at the school "too judgmental."

The bystander's advice to other students, now younger than he, is: "Don't take [such threats or jokes about potential violence] lightly. Come to . . . an adult for help, before it's too late."

* * * * *

In the same incident discussed in the first case study, two other students shared their experiences.

One bystander expressed that he thought the teachers in the school were aware of the shooter's "violent temper and direct threats." He described how the shooter had read papers aloud in front of the teacher and students, in which he spoke directly of harming the bystander and/or the school, and in which he outlined his fascination with bombs and killing. Given the openness of the shooter's threats in front of responsible adults and school authorities, the bystander thought school officials were aware of any danger the shooter posed and that they "had everything under control." Consequently, he believed there was no need for active intervention on his behalf. Prior to the incident, the school disciplined the shooter for possessing a gun on school property; however, the students were not notified. In retrospect, the bystander mentioned that he wished students had been notified as this information, combined with the information he and others had regarding the shooter's prior threatening statements and behaviors, may have altered the outcome.

Another bystander also reported that the shooter made numerous threats of violence at school in the presence of teachers and administrators. As a young adolescent, the bystander did not know what to make of her concerns or what to do. Since adults were aware of the problems, and given

her "trust for authority," the bystander assumed that the school staff was adequately addressing the issue. Looking back on the shooting, the bystander stated that children cannot afford to be passive about remarks they hear: "Don't take things said for granted." In addition, she said adults in schools "need to network more with the students, and bring various groups together."

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In an example of an averted school shooting, a bystander reported that he had heard rumors about possible violence in his high school. He stated that the potential attackers did not seem to be the usual outcasts described in newspaper reports of previous school shootings across the United States. It was more "like they fit in with their own bad crowd within the school," he explained.

The bystander stated that certain factors were crucial in providing him the support and courage to avert what could have become another school shooting. First, he reported that he was not close friends with the potential attackers so that allowed him to be more objective when he learned of a possible attack plan. Second, the impact of the shooting at Columbine High School weighed heavily upon him: "If not for Columbine, I might have thought twice about coming forward, but I couldn't be one of those who sat by." The bystander stated that the potential incident seemed too similar to the events in Colorado. Third, he noted that he felt an obligation to come forward: "I thought of my friends and just couldn't say nothing. It was the right thing to do." In describing what happened after he came forward with the information, the bystander stated that "Everybody was nice and understanding, and that helped." In addition, he mentioned that his "mother supported" him in coming forward. He offered advice to others who might find themselves in a similar situation: "Make sure to tell somebody before something dangerous can happen."

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